MADGE HILTON

or

Left to Themselves.

BY

AGNES C. MAITLAND

GOOLE SCHOOL BOARD

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BUY WAR SAVINGS CERTIFICATES
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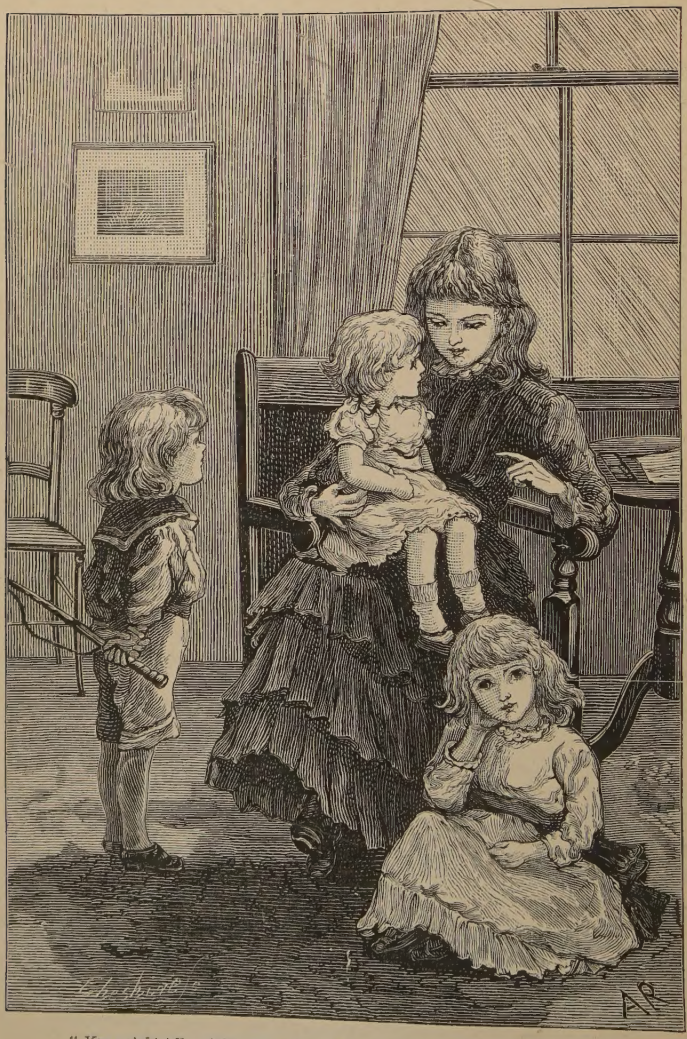
MADGE HILTON.



" You might tell a fairy story, Madge," asked Dolly fretfully. " I hate stories like that with no fairies."

THE STORY OF
MADGE HILTON

Or LEFT TO THEMSELVES

By AGNES C. MAITLAND

Troubles Ended—Leslie and her Mother.

Page 291.

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CHAPTER I.

A PIECE OF NEWS.

THERE was absolute silence in the schoolroom at Eston Grange.

It was not lesson time, and the room was filled with its rightful occupants—all, that is, but Mrs. Willis the governess—besides containing two intruders, Gerald and Jack, home from school. Tea was just coming. Everybody was pleasing themselves, and yet there had been silence in which you could have heard a pin drop for a minute and a half.

Such an extraordinary state of things could not last long. It was only the pause before the storm. One had hardly time to realize that for once the room was quiet,—no one chattering in English, French, or German; no one practising, crying, whistling, reading aloud, or singing,—before a perfect Babel of exclamations broke forth.

"Oh! oh!"

"It's not true, Jack!"

"Bosh!"

"I don't believe it!"

"He doesn't know."

These, and some of them often repeated, came in all the varying tones of surprise, sorrow, and disgust, that five pairs of lungs could produce.

"Who told you, Jack—who told you?" cried one voice shriller than all the rest, and the question was reiterated as if the speaker were determined to get an answer somehow; but Jack, a tall boy of about twelve or thirteen, who leant against the mantelpiece with his hands in his pockets and a slight smile of superior wisdom on his face, gave no reply.

It must have been some very startling piece of news that first took away the breath of all the schoolroom folk in this way, and then caused such an outburst of indignation. Madge, the second of the regular schoolroom party, and the owner of the shrill voice, turned appealingly to Gerald, finding that Jack took no notice of her, the colour coming hotly into her face as she spoke:

"Make him tell us, Gerald. It's too bad to say so much and not tell us any more."

Gerald roused himself sufficiently to sit upright in the one easy chair, which as the eldest of the family he claimed as his right whenever Mrs. Willis was out of the way, and observed contemptuously: "It's only one of Jack's yarns. No one told him any such rubbish!"

"No one did tell me, but I know," said Jack, calmly.

"Bah! one of your tales!" retorted Gerald, coiling himself up again in the arm-chair. "I'll believe it when I know how you heard it—not before."

"Madge is going to cry about it already," quoth Fred, an urchin of nine, looking curiously at Madge's flaming cheeks and her eyes, which did look suspicious.

"I'm not!" cried Madge hastily and indignantly. (Nearly all the Hilton family had a fixed idea that crying because you were hurt was disgraceful and cowardly, and most of them thought the same of crying because you were unhappy.) "All the same," she added, with a great gulp that choked down something not unlike a sob, "I do think Jack is very unkind.

He ought to tell us some more—and besides, I can't bear to think of it!"

"How am I unkind?" said Jack coolly. "I just told you all I knew about it, and I'll tell you again if you like. Father is going to New Zealand about some business, and he's going to take mother too, because she is not strong yet; and they'll be away a year. It won't matter so much to Gerald and me; but won't you girls have a jolly life, with Mrs. W. after you all the time, and having her own way with you! Don't I envy you, that's all!"

Every one seemed to be, in spite of themselves, a good deal impressed by Jack's positive assertions. Could he be right? They all knew that he had a wonderful way of picking up news, and putting two and two together so as to find out things that other people had meant to be kept secret; and though no one saw exactly how he did it, he was very apt to be correct in his conclusions.

Still, this was such a very unpleasant piece of news that no one liked to believe it. Even the twins, Dick and Dolly, sat side by side at the tea-table, with the corners of their mouths drawn down so far that they looked as if in

another moment they were going to burst into tears. As for Robin, the youngest of the schoolroom children, he had left off building brick castles, and was sitting on the floor turning his blue eyes from one face to another, as if trying to see in each how much of it all was true.

"Leslie, you haven't said a word," cried Madge, turning to a pretty fair girl a little older than herself, who was sitting in the window-seat with a book in her hand; "you don't believe it, do you?"

"Yes, I do," said Leslie quietly. "Jack told me this morning what he thought."

"But, Leslie," said Madge, jumping up and coming over to her and speaking low but very eagerly, "you don't think, do you, that it's because mother is any worse?"

"Of course not," said Leslie a little contemptuously. "You are always fancying things. She is much better, we all know; it is only to make her quite strong again."

Madge heaved a little sigh as she stood staring out into the pretty garden, bright with August sunshine and vivid summer blossoms, and pulling the blind-cord up and down through

her restless fingers. It seemed so long already since that dear mother had been anything at all like "quite strong," or able to be much with her children.

"I am sure," continued Leslie with more energy than she often showed, "it is quite horrid enough without fancying anything to make it worse."

The boys laughed. "There spoke Leslie's real self," said Gerald. "There is no love lost between you and Mrs. Willis, Les, is there?"

Leslie drew herself up with a rather reproving air which she sometimes assumed. "That is the silly way in which you boys talk," she said. "You don't understand things."

"Oh, we are much too grand to say straight out that we hate Mrs. Willis," said Jack, teazingly. "It would be much too undignified,"—mimicking her.

"I don't hate anyone," returned Leslie; "and you ought not to talk so before the little ones. Mrs. Willis is all very well for them, but I don't think"—this with great dignity—"I don't think she is equal to teaching Madge and me. We ought to have another governess, some one

more accomplished;" and she took up her book again, regardless of the boys' laughter.

"But you would not like a new one now," cried Madge, "if Jack is right, and father and mother are going away?"

"I should," said Leslie, and then she would answer no more.

The little ones were supposed not to have understood all this talk between their elders; but certainly they had been listening, open-mouthed, to every word. The twins now made their voices heard, speaking together as usual, but Dick just a little behind Dolly: "Madge, are father and mother really going away?"

"I don't know," answered Madge dejectedly. "I suppose they must be, as Jack is so certain."

"And is Mrs. Willis going too?" put in Robin. "Sha'n't we do any more lessons?"

"Nonsense! No, of course she is not. You'll have to do lessons just the same, whatever happens."

"I don't like them to go away," observed Dolly piteously, and two tears squeezed themselves over her eyelids and trickled down her cheeks. Dick stared at her a moment, and then began to cry too

"Don't, don't," begged Madge, hastily drying their eyes with her own rather untidy handkerchief. "Nobody does like it. It is horrid to think of, but don't cry—there's good children. Mrs. Willis will be down directly, and she'll want to know what you are crying for." Madge felt rather like crying herself at the moment.

"You are too much of a man to cry, Dick," said Gerald encouragingly, and Dick forthwith made a gallant effort to scrub all traces of tears away from his countenance.

"I wish they would let me go to school," observed Fred with dignity. "It will be too bad to keep me at home with only the girls and the babies, if father is away for so long."

But this remark only made Gerald and Jack shout with laughter, while Dick looked furious at being considered a baby.

"How can father go away for so long?" said Robin gravely. "Will the Queen let him go?"

"The Queen?" cried Jack, rolling him over on the floor with his foot. "What has the Queen got to do with it, Master Graveface?"

"Don't, please," the little boy said, wriggling out of the way of the intruding foot. "I thought the Queen wanted all her Parliament

men to tell her what to do. It says in my history book that that is what the Parliament men do, and I'm sure she won't let father go."

"They don't tell the Queen what to do," said Fred scornfully.

"Yes they do," persisted Robin. "That's the difference between England and other countries. In England the Parliament people tell the Queen what it would be best to do, and she does it; and in other countries the King or Queen just make the people do what they like. Isn't it true, Madge?"

"Well, I don't know exactly about all other countries," said Madge laughing, "but something like it."

"And," continued Robin, "I am sure she thinks father one of the wisest of her men, and so when he goes to ask leave she will say, 'No; I cannot let my wisest counsellor depart,'—and he will have to stay. I feel sure they won't go," and Robin curled himself up contentedly on the floor out of reach of Jack, and paying no attention to the laughter of the elder ones.

Dolly, however, was rather impressed by Robin's wisdom. "The Queen might telegraph

to father to ask what she was to do, you know," she said thoughtfully.

"But then all the telegraph people and clerks would know about it too," said Fred. "Sarah Jones down at the Post Office in the village knows what everybody says in their telegrams. I heard her say one day that the new curate wasn't coming for two weeks more, because his little brother had got measles, and he had telegraphed to Mr. Herbert to say so. But she said besides, she didn't believe it. Why didn't she?"

"Sarah Jones is a gossip, Fred," observed Gerald, "and you are another."

"I shall ask Mrs. Willis if she thinks the Queen will let father go," said Dolly; but this produced a very decided expression of opinion.

"No, no, Dolly, you are not to say anything about it at all," said Leslie, looking up from her book.

"We don't really know, you see; Jack may be wrong after all," said Madge;—("Jack's not wrong, though," observed that young gentleman in a parenthesis)—"and we don't want to set everybody talking about it."

"Yes, and mind, children, we won't have

this chattered about upstairs either," observed Gerald. "You are not to say a word to nurse and the babies, any more than to Mrs. Willis, mind that."

"I'll annihilate anyone who can't hold their tongues," added Jack, and at that very moment the door opened, and Mrs. Willis, a tall lady in mourning, with a pale grave face, entered. She looked a little surprised at the sudden and utter silence which fell upon the party, but she only told Robin to put away his bricks quickly, and asked whose week it was to make the room tidy.

"It's mine," said Madge, "I forgot;" and hastily she began to put away sundry books, pencils, etc., that were scattered on window-seat and chairs and floor, and almost before she had done, the tea tray was brought in. Jack and Gerald departed, and speaking French or not speaking at all became the order of the day.

CHAPTER II.

WAS IT TRUE?

It is probable that Mr. and Mrs. Hilton would have been a good deal surprised if they had chanced to overhear the talk that had just been carried on in the schoolroom, and it is quite certain that their plans were not by any means so nearly settled as Jack supposed. Jack had good reasons of his own for not giving up his authorities. He knew Gerald would have been rather indignant, and rightly so, if he had admitted that William the footman was his chief informant, and that William only knew what he had overheard when he was out with the carriage. One or two words and expressions which his father had let drop, and which no one with less quickness or who had not some ideas already on the subject would have noticed, were all besides that he had to go upon.

Jack, however, was a young gentleman

afflicted with an insatiable curiosity about other people's affairs; he meant no harm by it, he only "wanted to know." His school-fellows contemptuously declared he was "as curious as a girl," and as the world seems to have made up its mind once and for all that girls are more curious than boys, perhaps it is not much use saying anything on the matter. "All the proverbs are made by men and boys," as Madge Hilton once asserted. However, I have had a tolerably wide experience of both girls and boys, and perhaps I may be allowed to say that I have known a good many of both sorts who were troubled in this way, and were more anxious a great deal to know what they were not intended to know about their friends, neighbours, and parents' affairs, than they were to acquire all the knowledge that tutors, governesses, and parents stood by so ready and willing and desirous to impart.

Gerald's ideas on this question were different from Jack's, and Madge shared them. He thought that you had no business to find out what you were not intended to know. Jack maintained that there was no harm in it, if it was only something that you were sure to

be told by-and-by. Besides, he said, "people should be more careful not to say things that made you think and wonder; it was their own fault then if you guessed." But he took care, as I observed before, not to tell Gerald when he got information from William. Leslie had never exactly said anything about it, but everyone knew that she thought Gerald was absurdly particular, and she was always Jack's confidante and heard his long stories of what had happened, was happening, and was going to happen.

This much, however, was quite true. Mr. Hilton had important business to see after in New Zealand, which seemed likely to oblige him to go out there for a time, and he really was considering, and the doctors were considering too, whether it would not be a good thing for Mrs. Hilton to take the long voyage with him, and have all that time of rest and quiet, and freedom from the cares of her large and troublesome family.

It was two years now since the sad time that the children spoke of under their breath as "when May died." May was the eldest of the family; two years older than Gerald, a dear, bright girl whom everyone loved,

though perhaps only her mother really knew how dear and good she was, and what a help and treasure to all, young and old alike. The younger children had had scarlet fever and were getting well, but when the danger was thought to be over, May took it too, and in three days was gone from them.

Mrs. Hilton had been very ill after that, and never since then had she been able to have the children much with her. Very often indeed she had been up at the house in London, seeing doctors every day, while the children had all been left at the Grange with Mrs. Willis and the nurses. Still, then they knew she was near ; sometimes on Saturdays they went up to town; when she was a little better, Mrs. Hilton came to the Grange, where she was just now. Their father was always coming backwards and forwards ; at any time half an hour in the train brought him. It was all very different from what it would be if father and mother were both to be away for a whole year,—and at such a great distance too ; why, the letters would take, as the children said, "quite ages" to go and come.

Madge was thinking deeply of all these

things that evening, so deeply that the little ones could not get her to play at all. Besides, in spite of what Leslie had said, she could not help having a lingering fear that this new plan must mean that her mother was worse. They had, as it were, got used to the idea of her being ill, lying on the sofa, looking thin and delicate; but the thought of her going away for a whole year was very startling. Madge was thinking so much of her mother that she forgot to get ready to go to her after dinner, and when the bell rang she had hastily to run upstairs to make herself tidy, calling to Leslie, who was ready and quite neat, "Just wait one minute, do!" Nurse was giving the babies their bath, and Hannah was helping her, and of course they both objected to being interrupted and having to dry their hands to tie Madge's sash, so she had to wait herself. Not that she would have minded on any other night; she loved being in the nursery at bath time, but she was in a hurry to see her mother, and found Nurse's remark, "Well, Miss Madge, it's your own fault if you have to wait, you should have come at the proper time," all the more provoking because it was quite true.

"Well, my daughters, what have you been doing all day?" and she made a place for one beside her on the sofa, and for one on the footstool.

However, when they got to the drawing-room Mrs. Hilton was on the sofa looking so much as usual that Madge's fears began to abate. I do not think I shall try to tell you what Mrs. Hilton was like. I have noticed that most children do not really care or even know what their mother looks like; she is just their mother, and that is enough to make her delightful in their eyes. She was very gentle in manner, and, though she was ill, there was almost always a little tinge of pink colour in her cheek, which came and went, and sometimes was very bright. I think no one knew, or guessed—certainly the children had no idea—how often that beautiful colour was brought by the effort of bearing severe pain. To-night, however, she felt pretty well, and called Leslie and Madge to her, saying playfully, "Well, my tall daughters, and what have you been doing all day?" and she made a place for one beside her on the sofa, and for one on the footstool.

"Nothing very much," answered Leslie, taking the sofa-corner, while Madge, who loved a low seat, secured the footstool. The boys had gone out, and Mr. Hilton had not come

up from the dining-room. The room was half dark, and it was just the time for a talk.

"Oh! but, mother, we had the lawn tennis net put up," cried Madge; "the first time the gardener has let us have it out this holidays, because you know he says we spoilt the grass so in spring; and I beat Leslie two sets, and Gerald and I beat her and Jack one. It was such fun, you can't think!"

"I daresay not," said Mrs. Hilton smiling; "but gently, my dear," for Madge's voice was growing shrill even with the recollection of the fun. "Is that all your news?"

"No," said Leslie; "Madge and I have finished our duet."

"Oh yes, horrid thing!" put in Madge, who hated music, or at least always said so, and played abominably; "I don't call that news, do you, mother?"

"I like to hear about lessons sometimes, as well as about play," said her mother smiling, and stroking her hair. "All you do and care about interests me, you know."

"I suppose so," said Madge, "but I like best to tell you things that you really care about; not only because you've got to, I

mean. You only care about our lessons, don't you, because it's your duty to see we are educated, and that sort of thing?"

"Not exactly," said Mrs. Hilton, smiling; "and, Madge, may one not like one's duty, and take an interest in it?"

"I don't," said Madge decidedly, "no more does Leslie. A duty means a horrid sort of thing, that you've got to do, though you hate it,—like putting the room tidy in one's week, and practising, and putting back things one takes out, and always speaking French, and remembering rules. You do it, but you can't like it."

"Oh! Madge, Madge! And do you think so too, Leslie?"

"Those are the sort of things that Mrs. Willis always calls our duties," said Leslie, who had a book in her hand, and was fingering its edges as though she longed to open it.

"Well, but have you no other kind of duties? You two are the eldest in the schoolroom. You ought to help the little ones in lessons, be kind to them, and play with them sometimes, and take an interest in the things they care about."

"But, mother, those aren't duties," interrupted Madge, "those are things I like doing."

"They are none the less duties, dear, because you like them. If you did not like them, they would be duties all the same, only as you like them they are easy to you. I was going to add one more duty to the little ones to my list, when you interrupted me—one you don't like, I'm afraid—the duty of setting them an example."

Madge made a face, while Leslie answered, "Mrs. Willis is always talking about that. It is so tiresome to have to be always thinking of it."

"Ah, dears, there is one way never to find duty tiresome, however difficult it may be, and that is, to love it because it is duty. I am tired now, and cannot talk much more, but that is the true secret of the perfect law of liberty, —the perfect freedom of love."

The girls were both silent for a minute, then Madge asked gravely, "Is that in the Bible, mother; about the law of liberty, I mean?"

"Yes, dear." And no one spoke for a little, till Mrs. Hilton asked cheerfully, "How do you think Fred is getting on? does he seem

quite well?" Fred had always been delicate since the scarlet fever, and but for that would have been at school by this time.

"I don't know," said Leslie, "I suppose he is just the same as usual."

"I think he is getting on very well, mother," cried Madge; "he does his lessons much better, and it is more than two weeks since he had a headache, only to-day he played tennis in the sun with the twins, and he was rather tired after that, but he went and lay in Kamschatka for half-an-hour, and then he was all right."

"And where may Kamschatka be?" inquired Mr. Hilton, who entered just at that moment and heard the last words.

"Oh, it's the shady place at the back of the ice-house. We always call it Kamschatka, it is so cool there; it is quite delicious when one is hot."

Mrs. Hilton looked rather worried. "That cannot be good for him," she said. "Leslie, you are the eldest, you should not let him do such rash things."

"He always will," said Leslie. "I did not know where he was."

"Come," said Mr. Hilton, "I can answer for

it, he is none the worse yet. I saw him on his way up to bed in uproarious spirits, and as full of pranks as possible."

Mrs. Hilton shook her head, and still looked distressed, and Mr. Hilton, after a glance at her face, suggested that it was time for the girls to follow Fred.

As they left the room they heard their mother say, "Oh Frank, Frank, perhaps I am over-anxious, but I don't know how to leave them all! I can't——"

The door closed—they heard no more; but Leslie turned to Madge, and said, "There! did you hear that?"

"Yes, I did," answered Madge, but not another word would she say; and she was very silent through all the time of undressing, and even when they got to bed, though she was actually wide awake for at least half-an-hour after lying down, instead of falling asleep as usual the very instant her head touched the pillow.

CHAPTER III.

MADGE'S DRIVE.

THE next morning was Madge's turn for early practice. At half-past seven she had to be at the piano, and she must practise till a quarter-past eight. Madge certainly did not love that part of her duties. Often when Hannah came to call "the young ladies," Madge would roll over with a groan saying, "I must lie still five minutes more! It's horrid practice-morning!" Leslie never could see that it made any difference, as it had to be done some time in the day, any way, but Madge said it was so odious to begin the day with something that you hated.

To-day, however, she woke up completely at Hannah's first call, and instantly remembering a decision she had made the night before, she jumped out of bed and began to dress fast.

"What are you in such a hurry for to-day?" inquired Leslie sleepily, half opening her eyes to look at her.

"I want to catch Jack before I practise, if I can. I've got something to say to him," and as quickly as possible she ran downstairs.

How tiresome! Jack was not to be found. Generally both he and Gerald were up and out before the girls, and Madge had heard his door open before she was dressed, but now all in vain she hunted through his favourite haunts. He was not at the dog kennel, nor at the rabbit hutches, nor in the poultry yard, nor at the stables; and the minutes were slipping by fast. There was the half-hour striking on the stable clock, and she must go in. She did so want to see Jack, and now she did not know when she could get a minute alone with him. It was too provoking—she fairly stamped her foot with vexation.

There was Mrs. Willis's voice, too, calling, "Madge, Madge, *ou êtes-vous donc? Pourquoi êtes-vous sortie si bientôt? Vous devez être au piano.*"

It was quite enough, Madge thought, to put any good resolutions out of one's head; in fact, she was almost inclined to wish that she could altogether forget one she had made last night about this very practising, but perhaps that was

just the reason that she remembered it most distinctly. She ran in from the pleasant morning sunlight, and sat down doggedly to try and master the difficulties of a sonata of Dussek's. Surely no composer before or since ever perpetrated any work more exasperating, Madge thought, as in vain she tried to get the right-hand triplets smooth and even, and in time with the left hand's steady quavers; but she stuck to it, resisted all her old temptations of slurring difficulties, playing easy airs that she knew and liked, or picking out a tune of her own; nor did she once rise from the music stool till the prayer bell told her it really was time to leave off. The morning practice was not in the schoolroom, for fear of disturbing Mrs. Hilton, but in a little room off the drawing-room, which was further away from her bedroom; and it would be hard to tell what a temptation the books that lay about were to Madge. There were some she knew she might not touch, and those she honestly let alone; but voyages and travels, and books that she had heard her father talk of, only too often tempted her to leave the piano "just for a minute"—just to look at this picture, or read

that little bit, till the time that should have been given to practice was sadly curtailed. No one could hear that the practising stopped. Mrs. Willis was otherwise occupied, and never thought of asking the girls if they had been diligent—taking it for granted that they would do their work properly, and hardly ever before last night had it distinctly come home to Madge that this habit of hers was really wrong. It was simply that, as with many other things, she had done it without thinking; but her mother's words, few though they were, had for once made her think a little more than usual.

She rose with a great sigh of relief at the sound of the bell, and flew off to the dining-room, but her early run-out had blown her hair all ways at once, and she was dispatched upstairs to smooth it. Oh dear! the worries of this life and the curliness of her hair were almost too much for Madge! Fortune favoured her after breakfast, however, for Mr. Hilton asked to speak with Mrs. Willis for a few minutes; so there was a little spare time, and she caught Jack in a quiet part of the garden.

"Oh, Jack, I wanted to speak to you, just for a minute," she cried. "Where did you go

this morning? I hunted everywhere for you!"

"What does it matter to you?" returned Jack. "Was that all you wanted to say?"

"No, it wasn't that at all," said Madge, more quietly, as she remembered that what she was going to say might possibly make him angry. "It was just this. I wanted to tell you that I am going to ask mother if it is true that she and father are going away."

Jack turned round and stared at her. "What?" he said. "Say that again."

"Don't be angry, please, Jack," said Madge humbly, "but I am going to ask mother about what you told us last night."

"And what business have you to do that, I should like to know?" It was evident enough that Jack was angry.

"I sha'n't say anything about you, you know," his sister answered. "I shan't tell how we heard it, but I can't bear to know things and pretend not to know them. It doesn't seem fair or right. Besides, if you are wrong, and it's not true——"

"What then?"

"I don't want to be thinking about it, and miserable about it, all for nothing."

"You seem to have made up your mind exactly what you are going to do. Pray why did you think it necessary to tell me anything at all about the matter? What do I care what you are silly enough to do or say?"

Jack's manner was very provoking; but Madge managed to answer quietly, though decidedly, "I thought it would be more fair to tell you what I had made up mind to do."

"Oh, indeed! you are mighty particular about what's fair and honest to-day. Well, I can tell you this: it's the last time I'll ever let you hear anything I know. You may be quite sure of that!" and with his hands in his pockets and an air of great indignation, Jack marched off.

Madge lingered a moment to try and get rid of a sort of lump that had risen in her throat, but though she hated quarrelling, Jack's anger had not made any difference to her decision; she was quite determined to ask her mother at the very first opportunity if it was true that they were to be left for a year.

Her opportunity did not come that day, nor the next, however. The day after, Mr. Hilton again asked to speak with Mrs. Willis after breakfast, and they had a long talk in the study.

It was quite an hour or more before Mrs. Willis rang the schoolroom bell, and the children were tired of waiting for her. Then began a busy and rather uncomfortable morning of lessons, in the course of which some of her young subjects thought that she was "very cross," though perhaps older people might have been inclined to think that she looked disturbed and anxious, rather than cross. The twins were set off in one of their giggling fits by some prank of Fred's, and Madge was too much inclined to laugh herself to do much to stop them, so it was not till they had wasted twenty minutes or more, and Mrs. Willis had spoken sharply, and set them each an extra lesson, that they really stopped. Leslie disputed Mrs. Willis's decisions three or four times on questions that arose connected with their lessons, and though reference to dictionaries, grammars, and encyclopædias proved Mrs. Willis to be right in every case but one, Leslie was as triumphant over that one as she

could have possibly been if she had been right, and Mrs. Willis wrong, every time. Though they made it a point of honour always to side with each other against a governess, Madge could not honestly help thinking that Leslie's manner was not very nice, and she hardly wondered when she heard Mrs. Willis sigh once or twice.

Just at luncheon time, a message came to say that "Mrs. Hilton felt well enough for a drive this afternoon, and wished to know if Mrs. Willis would allow one of the young ladies to be ready to go with her,"—which meant for the fortunate one selected, missing some part, at any rate, of afternoon lessons.

"Very well," answered Mrs. Willis, and when William had left the room she added, "Madge, you may go."

"Why? it's my turn!" said Leslie, looking up hastily from her book.

"That has nothing to do with it," said Mrs. Willis very quietly. "You must be more respectful in your manner to me before you can expect me to allow you any privileges."

Leslie was silent from sheer astonishment. It was long indeed since she, the eldest in the

schoolroom, had been reproved in that manner —and before the little ones, too. Surely Mrs. Willis was different this morning from what she usually was.

However, if Leslie were silent downstairs, she made up for it amply when she and Madge were together doing their hair for the schoolroom dinner. "It's too bad, isn't it?" she cried. "I declare I don't see what business she has to interfere with those sort of things that have nothing to do with our lessons!" and Leslie's fair face was all clouded with anger and vexation. "I wanted so much to go."

"It is hard lines," said Madge sympathizingly, though she, too, was anxious to go. "It makes me feel so mean besides, because it really was your turn."

"Of course it was. I tell you what, it's just a piece of spite on her part because I was right about the date of the first tribunes of the people and she was wrong! I should be ashamed to be so spiteful if I were she!"

But Madge's honesty could not suffer this. "Oh Leslie, I don't think it was really that!" she cried. "She could not be so horrid. I thought she was pleased at your being right."

"Stuff and nonsense," returned Leslie scornfully. "It was just that and nothing else."

Madge did not contradict her again, but said, "I rather wish it had been some other afternoon. I have done my practising to-day, you see, and I would so much rather miss that than my English composition."

"It doesn't matter much. Everything is horrid alike," answered Leslie crossly, and with this sweeping statement she prepared to go downstairs. Madge followed her, feeling "mean," as she said, because she reaped advantage from Leslie's deprivation, and yet she did so wish to have a talk with her mother.

She had not quite shaken off this feeling when the carriage came round; she looked grave even when her father, who came to the door to help his wife in and see them start, laughingly bade her take good care of her mother and not talk more than nineteen to the dozen; and either that, or his caution, or else some difficulty in beginning what she wanted to say, kept her actually quite silent for at least a quarter of a mile. Then Mrs. Hilton, refreshed after the fatigues of dressing by coming out into the soft warm air, turned to her,

smiling, and said, "Well, Madge dear, father did not say you were not to speak one word."

"No," cried Madge, with a laugh and a sort of bound in her corner of the carriage; "I know he didn't; and it's partly because I've got so much I want to say that I don't know how to begin. I very—*most* particularly wanted to talk to you this afternoon."

"Was that why Leslie let you come?" said her mother, who had experience enough of Madge's way to know that "very—*most* particularly" perhaps did not cover anything of very great importance. "I thought it was her turn to-day."

Madge's face fell. "No; Mrs. Willis would not let her," she said; "but don't ask me about it, please; I hated coming because it really was her turn, though I did want so much to come too." Mrs. Hilton looked a little disturbed.

"Does Leslie," she began—"But I will not ask you, my dear. It is better not."

"No, don't, there's a darling mother," cried Madge, getting possession of her hand. "I should only feel more mean. I think, do you know, that no one ought *ever* to give anyone a punishment for any reason that gives some-

one else what they want. It's horrid! and I am sure it's a bad principle!"

"Perhaps so," said Mrs. Hilton, half smiling at her vehemence, but speaking absently too; "but I suppose it was not to say that, that you were so anxious to come out with me this afternoon?"

"No, indeed it wasn't!" and Madge sat upright in her corner and prepared herself for a great effort.

"Mother," she said, squeezing her fingers hard together and trying to speak as quietly as possible, though her cheeks were crimson with excitement, "please don't be angry with me for asking, but we've heard—all we in the schoolroom, you know—that you and father are going away for a whole year to New Zealand. Do—do tell me if it's really true?"

Mrs. Hilton did not answer at all for a moment. Then she said gravely, "How did you hear this, Madge?"

"I promised not to tell that," said Madge, very low. "Are you angry with me for asking?"

"Why did you ask?"

"Because, mother," cried Madge, taking

courage, "I can't bear to know things and pretend not to know them. I didn't want to know this, but I was told—and then besides, if it's a mistake——"

"What then?" said her mother, just as Jack had said, but very gently.

"Oh mother! If you have to go we can't help it, and it'll make you strong perhaps, but—but—if it's not true, why should we be unhappy with thinking about it?" and Madge could not with all her efforts keep back the hot tears that rose in her eyes, and fell over her cheeks.

Mrs. Hilton took her hand again, and Madge felt she was not angry, though she did not speak at once. At last she said, "I cannot answer your question just this moment, Madge. I must think a little. Don't talk any more just now, dear child," and she leant back and closed her eyes.

She had much to think of, and she knew that any agitation was very bad for her health; but Madge's eager words and tearful looks had almost overcome her. The fact was, that all unsettled as their plans had been only yesterday, this very morning had brought letters to Mr. Hilton which made it quite clear that he, at any rate, must take this journey, and start, if

possible, within a very short time ; two months, at least, sooner than they had at first expected. Moreover, the doctors had agreed in saying that the voyage and rest would undoubtedly give the best chance for her own recovery, and though the poor lady had almost hoped in the depths of her heart that they might decide otherwise, she did not feel that it would be right, under these circumstances, to refuse to go, bitterly though she dreaded the thought of leaving all her dear children, and distinctly and sorrowfully though she perceived that it was possible that the doctors might be wrong, and that she might never—but she would not let herself dwell on that thought.

Thus it happened, that after spending an anxious morning in talk and consultation, Mr. and Mrs. Hilton had decided that they would go ; and letters had even been written about the vessel in which their passage was to be taken. But there was still some uncertainty, for it was doubtful whether they could get berths in the first vessel ; and if not, they must wait another month. There was of course much to settle and arrange, and Mrs. Hilton knew so well the wildly unsettled state—in which nothing is done

properly, nothing seems of any consequence, and everything is left until "after,"—into which any great and unexpected change is apt to throw young minds, that she did not wish the children to have heard their plans until everything was settled.

It mattered less now, certainly, if they were to go so much sooner, but still her little daughter's words had disturbed Mrs. Hilton for more reasons than one, and many, many sorrowful and anxious thoughts passed through her mind while she leant back so quietly.

Meanwhile, Madge had dried her eyes and sat sometimes gazing out at the fields and hedges, feeling, as she would have said, rather odd, and rather as if it were a dream and could not be true; and sometimes half-timidly, with a feeling as if she were intruding, watching her mother's face, so still, though with such a beautiful colour in it.

It seemed a long time to Madge. She, too, had done a good deal of thinking before Mrs. Hilton roused herself with a faint sigh that turned into a smile as she met her daughter's eyes. "Well, dear Madge," she said

gently, "I must tell you that what you have heard is quite true. I cannot say that I am exactly glad or pleased that you should have heard such an important thing from anyone except from your father or me, but since you have heard it, it cannot be helped. I suppose, Madge, neither you nor Leslie have been gossiping with the servants?"

"Oh, no, mother!"

"Well, perhaps one is not always so careful as one should be, with so many sharp little eyes and ears about," said Mrs. Hilton, remembering one or two remarks of her husband's. "And since you know so much, I may as well tell you what we propose to do."

"Must you really—really go, mother?" asked Madge sorrowfully.

"The doctor thinks it will do me good, dear."

"And for a whole year?"

"It would be hardly worth while going for less. Come, Madge, you must not cry, dear child, I cannot bear it, and you must be brave for my sake;" and Madge strove hard to get rid of the tears that had come in spite of her earnest wish to keep quiet, and not distress her mother.

"When are you going?" she said.

"In about four weeks, most likely."

"Oh! that is very soon—I thought it wouldn't be for a much longer time. That's before the boys' holidays end."

"I'm afraid it must be then, if possible."

"And who is to take care of you on the voyage, and out there, mother?"

"Aunt Lilia is going with me, and with her and your father, and Preston, too, I am sure I shall be well taken care of."

"I don't know what we *are* to do, I'm sure, all that long time," said Madge with a sigh from the depth of her heart. Aunt Lilia was her own special favourite aunt and godmother.

"Mrs. Willis will take charge of the house, and of you all," continued her mother, "and your father means to appoint Uncle Harry as your guardian while he is away, to take his place for the time and settle any difficulties that may arise."

"A guardian! How very odd, mother. I thought no one had guardians unless they were orphans, and had a great deal of money. In all our story-books the people with guardians are like that."

"Well, you see, other sorts of people do have guardians sometimes," said Mrs. Hilton, smiling.

"I daresay Uncle Harry won't be a bad kind of one to have," continued Madge reflectively. "He is great fun sometimes. What did you mean by settling difficulties—what sort of difficulties, mother?"

"Why, that I can hardly tell you, Madge; I cannot tell what may happen, only it is right that there should be someone to whom Mrs. Willis can appeal at any time, and who will settle things as your father and I should if we were at home."

"Do you mean if any of us were troublesome?" inquired Madge.

Mrs. Hilton hesitated a moment. "I hope that none of you will be troublesome, but that is included, of course."

"What! not for a whole year?" exclaimed Madge, in very expressive tones. "Mother, we can't, we can't possibly."

"I don't think it is too much to expect of you four elder ones," said her mother; "indeed, I do expect it."

Madge shook her head very doubtfully. They were getting near home again now; a

few minutes more would bring them to the house door.

"Oh, one thing more, mother: may we write to Uncle Harry as we do to you and father, if we want anything?"

"Yes, certainly; and, Madge, though we have had this talk, do not say anything to Leslie or to the boys. I will tell them myself; not just now, but after dinner, when I am rested."

"I have tired you dreadfully—I have made you talk too much," cried Madge remorsefully, noticing how worn-out her mother looked.

"Nay, dear, I am glad we have had this quiet time together; and, Madge, I think I can trust you to do your best, both for yourself and for the others too, while we are away."

"Yes, mother; yes," said Madge, with an earnestness that rose from the very bottom of her heart; and her mother drew her close to her and kissed her warmly. How Madge would have liked a little time alone when she got in, but she had only a moment after she took off her things, for it was almost tea-time. Still, one can make a very good resolution even in a moment, if one is really in earnest.

CHAPTER IV.

GRUMBLES AND GROWLS.

Leslie and the boys had a talk with their mother that same evening, but as the juniors had gone to bed before that, it was not till next morning that Fred and the little ones, as he chose to call them, heard that Jack's wonderful news was true after all. Then, indeed, there was chattering enough. A nest of young sparrows was nothing to it.

I need not tell you that they were all very sorry, as sorry as they could possibly be, that their father and mother were going to leave them for so long. They were all loving, affectionate children, though often thoughtless and careless; and at first their minds were fully occupied with the idea of the parting. But over and above this great trouble almost everyone, unless it were Madge and Gerald, had some special and particular grievance of their own in the matter, which they soon took every oppor-

tunity of airing, when the authorities were out of hearing. Then of course there were constant discussions in the "lower house," as Jack called the younger ones, about the places to which father and mother were going, the distance, and the adventures they would have. Robin, who had a lively imagination, even ventured to suggest that they would be shipwrecked on a desert island, "though, of course, everybody would be saved, and father would tell them all what to do." But this idea was treated with such scorn that he did not attempt to make another remark for about half an hour.

The elders and the young ones too had a good deal to say about other things connected with this change in their lives—Uncle Harry's guardianship, for instance; and the even more surprising fact which had transpired a day or two later,—that they were going to have another governess as well as Mrs. Willis,—a young French lady.

Fred was very much inclined to think himself specially ill-used by this prospect. His grievance was that he was not to go to school till his father and mother returned, and he thought it very hard. Perhaps it was—not

very, but a little hard. He was still delicate, and in spite of all his high spirits and pranks he would have found life at school with rough boys who knew nothing about him, away from all the care he was accustomed to, rather different from what he imagined it; but still he was at an age when boys usually go to school. "Gerald went to school when he was much, much less than I am," he frequently observed in grumbling tones, and he had begun to fancy himself too old to be under a governess. "And now to think of there being two, and one of them a French one!" Fred rolled about on the floor with vexation when he heard it, and for some days was very cross indeed.

I am sorry to say that Leslie's complaints did not tend to make him more contented, and she was not wise enough, or had not self-control enough to be silent before him and the younger children; though if she had thought for a moment she must have known that the way she talked of Mrs. Willis was very bad for them to hear. It was the old story. Mrs. Willis had been with them some time, and Leslie, who was a clever girl, chose to fancy that she had learnt all that Mrs. Willis could

teach her, and that therefore she was justified in rebelling secretly against her authority, going as near as she dared to actual disobedience, and constantly murmuring that it was too bad, that her mother ought to give her more advantages, and either let her go to school or have another governess. Anyone would have fancied that she would have been pleased to hear that another governess was coming, but no. She had heard that Mademoiselle de Laserre was young, and she had at once made up her mind that she would be "no good," and completely under Mrs. Willis besides. And meanwhile, Leslie went on, day by day letting this one discontented thought eat away and spoil all her good qualities, and change her character far more than she knew, or would have believed if any one had told her.

Jack, meanwhile, stalked about a good deal with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, and a dignified air, ostentatiously taking no notice of Madge. Madge did not like it, but she hoped he would make friends in a day or two. She had no idea what was wrong, for she could not believe that he was still vexed with her because she had asked her mother if she were

really going away. The fact was that Mr. Hilton had himself had a talk with the boys about his absence from them all, and had given Jack a special warning against associating much with the men-servants, and gossiping with them. Jack was wrath at this, and chose to believe that Madge had broken her promise and told who had brought the news to the schoolroom, and that somehow (he did not trouble himself to make out how), Madge had let out, or it had been found out, that he had heard it from William. Poor Madge had, as we know, not mentioned Jack at all, and certainly had not told anyone what she did not know; and she felt Jack's displeasure, and the way he shirked her in all their games a good deal.

As for Dick, and Dolly, and Robin, they seemed to have caught the infection of disgust with things in general from their elders, and were very cross and snappish to each other. They had also taken up an idea that there would "be no fun all the holidays now," as Mrs. Willis was to be with them, and were following the unwise plan of spoiling all the fun they might have had just now by grumbling about the future.

Certainly the schoolroom minds were not in a very pleasant state, and Mrs. Willis sighed, and her heart failed her sometimes as she thought of the year that lay before her.

Poor lady! She was not very strong, and the children did not know how difficult it often was to her to be firm with them when she thought it right, nor how eagerly she had looked forward to leaving them next Christmas, and settling in a little home of her own with her son and daughter, who were now old enough to support her; nor yet how reluctantly she had consented to stay the year to oblige Mr. and Mrs. Hilton.

Perhaps it would have been better if she had sometimes talked a little to the elder children about herself, and her wishes and hopes, but she never did so. She thought it wiser not; but it may be that she was mistaken. The Hiltons were not particularly selfish children; they would have been sorry for her and glad with her if she would have let them, but as it was they just thought her "cross" when she looked sad or thoughtful, and troubled their heads no more about the matter.

Madge had not forgotten her promise to her

mother, nor her own resolves, but she could not help thinking sometimes that it would be very hard work to keep them if things went on like this.

One evening she and Gerald were out together, but they had not spoken for a long time, when Madge suddenly stretched herself out on the grassy bank in the orchard where they were sitting, with a sigh so loud that it attracted Gerald's attention.

"What's the matter, Madge?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing exactly."

"When people say 'nothing' in that sort of way, they generally mean 'everything,'" observed Gerald.

Madge sat up again, and began to laugh. "Well, it is almost everything," she said; "I say, Gerald, are not we beginning horridly?"

"Things do seem rather at sixes-and-sevens in the schoolroom, certainly," said Gerald. "What's up?"

"I don't know exactly what has put everything wrong, but you can't guess what it's like. I'll tell you though! You know how it feels if you are walking in the High Street where they are building on a windy, dusty day.

Everything you touch is gritty, and there's grit in your eyes, and in your mouth, and in your hair, and all over your face. Well, it's just as if everybody was like that."

Gerald laughed; and she continued, "And if it's so bad now, what will it be when father and mother are really gone? And besides," she added passionately, "I don't know how they can—just now!" And the little girl's eyes filled with tears.

Gerald understood his little sister. "Yes," he said bluntly; "one good-sized trouble ought to hinder them making up such a lot of little ones."

He was a boy of few words, and the quietest member of this noisy household, but as sometimes happens with quiet people, he had a good deal of influence. His brothers and sisters took many of their opinions from him almost without knowing it; the servants thought Mr. Gerald had a deal of sense, and all alike were quite sure that though he was indolent and unwilling to exert himself, if he were once roused to take a side or give an opinion, he was sure to take the side of what was right and true.

"I wish one thing very much," said Madge, after a silence, "very much indeed."

"What is it?"

"I do wish something would set Leslie and Mrs. Willis to rights again before they go. She is always saying something against her, and it is so bad for them."

"Who dragged who round the walls of what, when and where?" murmured Gerald as he lay on his back with half-closed eyes. "It's a little difficult to follow your meaning, Madge."

Madge was too much in earnest to laugh. "Oh, don't you know, Gerald, I hate to say anything about Leslie, but she thinks Mrs. Willis is not clever enough to teach her—and I dare say she isn't either, because Leslie is *so* clever; but she talks about it before the little ones, and she thinks Mrs. Willis has a spite against her besides, and the little ones are taking it up and talking just the same, and beginning to think they needn't mind Mrs. Willis either."

Gerald whistled.

"It is such a pity, especially just now, you see, for as we've got to be with Mrs. Willis for a whole year, and nobody else to speak

of—for of course Uncle Harry won't have much to do with us unless something goes wrong—it does seem as if it would be so much better to make the best of it at the beginning, and not the worst."

Gerald nodded.

"Don't you think," pleaded Madge, "that you could manage to say something to her—just to get her to see the rights of it?"

"Couldn't," said Gerald, "she wouldn't stand it from me. If I hear the little ones going in for that sort of talk, I'll walk into them! and may be that'll open her eyes a little. It's too bad! She ought to know better."

"I am sure it is very tiresome for her," said Madge, fearing she had blamed Leslie too much. "I don't mind it myself, you see, because I don't care about lessons and books, and those sort of things. I dare say I should hate it quite as much as she does if I did. But oh! I do wish she didn't fancy that Mrs. Willis has taken a spite against her! I'm sure it isn't true; and I can't say I think it is, and then Leslie thinks I am so unkind!" And once more Madge's brown eyes were

filled with drops that seemed dangerously near running over.

"It is hard on you," said Gerald consolingly, and as Madge drew closer to him he attempted one or two rough boyish caresses to comfort her.

They were silent for a few minutes, and then Gerald, turning his face away, and aiming a small pebble at the trunk of the nearest apple-tree while he spoke, said gruffly, "After all, Madge, one needn't mind what they say or do—it needn't make one go wrong oneself."

"No, and it shan't, but it does make it harder. Oh, Gerald, I wish you were going to be at home."

"I'm jolly glad that I'm not though," said the boy laughing; "but don't you know father has got an extra week for Jack and me, so that we shall go up to London with them?"

"No, you hadn't told me. That *is* nice for you;" and in talking over what was to be done with the extra week Madge forgot her troubles.

Meanwhile the days were slipping on fast, and it only wanted a fortnight to the day the

start was to be made. Mrs. Willis was going away for a few days, so there were to be holidays for everyone. Mr. Hilton had been rather afraid of the noisy fun of holiday times for his wife, and had even proposed that she should go back to London; but Mrs. Hilton could not bear to leave her children any sooner than was necessary, and she assured her husband that the noise would not hurt her. Moreover, the children were so much horrified at the idea of their noise hurting their mother, that on the whole these were the quietest holidays that had ever been known at the Grange.

The day but one before the steamer sailed was Madge's birthday, and they had always had a tea-party or some special fun on that day, but no one liked to say anything about it this year. However, Mrs. Hilton had not forgotten it, and about ten days before it came, she told the girls that they might ask their dear friend Ella Carew, who lived with her grandmother about a mile away, to spend the day with them, that all the children might sit up to supper, and that they might have any amusement that they liked to invent.

"Provided it is tolerably quiet," put in Mr. Hilton.

"Never mind that for this one night," said his wife.

"Oh but we shall mind it, mother," said Madge; "for of course if it were noisy you couldn't come, and we shall want you to see it;" and with these mysterious words, and brimful of their news, the girls departed to the schoolroom, where they found all the party assembled.

Their tidings were received with shouts of joy, and there was no doubt at all as to what the amusement would be. "Acting—we must have acting," was the unanimous cry.

What they should act, however, was quite another question.

"The Babes in the Wood," begged Dick and Dolly, who had once played the "Babes" and were always wanting to do it again, forgetting how big they were growing.

"No, no," cried Fred. "Let's have a charade this time—we can have so much more fun in that. I hate those stupid 'Babes.'"

"Yes," cried Robin, "everybody can be

anything they like in a sh'rade. I'll be a judge, and send you all to prison."

"I'll be a soldier, then," cried Fred and Dick together.

"You youngsters make such a row, there is no getting in a word," said Jack loftily. "I say, don't you think we could do Victor Galbraith? It would make a first-rate tableau."

"Yes, and I'll do the bugling," exclaimed Fred—

> "'Victor Galbraith! Victor Galbraith!
> Come forth to thy death,
> Victor Galbraith,'"—

and he bugled through his joined fists in a most unmusical manner.

"Oh, hush! Fred," cried Madge. "But, Jack, I'm sure that wouldn't do. I shouldn't mind if they killed him at once, but you know they had to shoot him twice over, and that is so horrid."

"We couldn't do it," said Leslie, "and besides, it would make far too much noise, and the babies would cry when they saw him killed, and everybody would be uncomfortable. It would never do."

"A charade is the best, I think," said Gerald.

"Well, then I must be a servant," cried Dolly, "and wear a cap and apron. I'll break all the china and be very rude."

"I wish we could have done some Shakespeare," said Madge regretfully. "But I'm afraid there isn't time. 'As You Like It' would be so nice. I would be Rosalind and Leslie should be Celia."

"But there must be something for Ella to do," said Leslie, "and we couldn't ask her to be Audrey or that silly Phœbe. It would be rude."

"No it wouldn't *really*," said Madge. "I know I would never mind taking any part, even if it was a horrid one, if I was asked, because it's not for yourself, you know; it's for the play."

"Why didn't you choose Phœbe for yourself, then?" inquired Jack scoffingly.

"Oh! because of course if you *can* choose—" but Gerald interrupted,

"As we can't do it, I don't see that we need settle the parts," he observed bluntly.

"And besides," cried Fred, "I think that

Shakespeare's horrid—horrid——" And he paused to think of a word sufficiently contemptuous —" horrid bosh ! "

Madge was quite ready and eager for an argument over this frightful heresy, but Leslie stopped her. " Don't talk to him, what's the use ? " she said. " I've got an idea."

" Indeed ? " said Jack politely. "Wonders will never cease."

" I've had it for a long time," pursued Leslie, quite regardless of him. " And I think I can bring all in—all the parts everybody wants, I mean : a judge, and soldiers,—or at least policemen,—and servants, and a mistress and master."

" Oh, that would be capital ! And would there be a part for Ella too ? "

" Yes—parts for everybody, I think. There is only one thing at all difficult to manage," she said, thoughtfully, " and we can do that if Jack will let us have his old stuffed jackdaw."

" You may have him, and welcome," said Jack. " His feathers are all coming out, and one eye's gone." And forthwith all the party plunged into an eager and excited discussion over " Leslie's idea."

Ella Carew was written to, and duly invited for the important day. But besides that, arrangements were made for various meetings in their walks, as they had something very, very interesting to talk to her about. For the whole of the next ten days an air of mystery and secrecy hung over all the schoolroom party. There was a great turning-out of all old properties and materials for dressing up, that had been used on former occasions. Leslie and Madge were constantly busy either with pens and paper, or with their needles. "In fact," as Nurse somewhat sourly observed, "it would be a good thing if they—either of them—ever sewed half as much for anything useful."

"But then," as Madge said, "Nurse did not know how much nicer this was going to be than anything they had ever acted before."

It was wonderful how quickly the days flew past, and how completely everyone's troubles were forgotten for the time. Leslie's idea seemed likely to do what Madge had wished, and set everything "to rights."

CHAPTER V.

"THE PLAY'S THE THING."

THE eventful day came at last. Madge had her birthday presents in the morning—a story-book from her brothers and sisters, and a silver watch, like one Leslie had had last year, from her father and mother. She was very much pleased with her watch.

"It's very good of you to give it to me," she said. "It's the most darling little one I ever saw. I do—I *do* hope I shall be able to take care of it."

"You ought to be, my darling," said her mother, by whose bedside she was standing.

"I don't know," replied Madge; "you see I forget so many things in a day already, that it really seems almost a pity to give me another to remember."

"But the watch might help you to remember

some other things, Madge: the right times for different duties, and so on."

Madge did not seem quite convinced, but Leslie called her, and she ran off. They had a great deal to do that morning, all most important work, and so had the boys.

Ella Carew came at dinner time. She was just between Leslie and Madge in age, though smaller than either of them. Her father and mother were both in India, she could hardly recollect them, and led a lonely life with her grandmother, an old lady who was rather strict, and very particular about manners and what Ella said she called "lady-likeness." Ella's dearest delight was to be at the Grange with the Hiltons. She thought Leslie and Madge the happiest girls in the world, and sometimes, but not often, bemoaned her own lot, "with no brothers and sisters at all, and a father and mother so far off that they hardly count." She was seldom in a dolorous mood, however; she was generally laughing in spite of her troubles, and both boys and girls at the Grange liked her. Leslie even was sometimes a little disposed to envy her, because she had no little ones to "bother;" she need never think of

"setting an example, and all that sort of thing;" and lastly, she had a German governess who could teach everything, and she went up to London for lessons from masters besides.

Ella was in tremendous spirits to-day, and ready for anything; her tongue went faster even than Madge's. She chattered to the little ones, chaffed the boys, mimicked her German governess and her Italian music master, and kept them all laughing till they were tired. All the preparations for the evening were finished by four o'clock, and they had a splendid game of hide-and-seek before tea, in which all but Leslie joined, to refresh themselves after so much sitting still. Ella distinguished herself in a way that would have shocked her grandmother terribly, by climbing up into one of the big laurel-bushes, and hiding there most successfully; but the little ones appealed against it. "People mustn't do it," said Robin decidedly, "the boys will always be doing it, an' they might hide up in the tops of the big elms where the rooks build, an' we shouldn't ever find them."

"Or in an oak-tree, like King Charles," said

Madge; but Dick and Dolly objected even to the mention of an English king in playtime, it reminded them too much of lessons and the date-card.

Tea brought them all in; the boys for this occasion only having schoolroom tea, as their help was wanted so much. When it was over, there was just time to make all the final arrangements before Mr. and Mrs. Hilton came into the drawing-room.

The acting was to be in the back drawing-room because their mother could lie on her sofa and see it. Mr. Hilton sat near her. Nurse had brought down the two and four-year-old Frances and Daisy, but they were sitting on their father's knees. Nurse and Mrs. Preston were a little behind. Ann the housemaid was there, and fat Mrs. Joy the cook had put on her best cap and come up from the kitchen, because she heard the young ladies were going to do something "so pretty," and Rogers the butler and even William were in the doorway.

The folding-doors were opened, and it was seen that most of its own proper furniture had been moved out of the room, all the ornaments

were gone—but Ann had done that—and instead, there was the nursery deal table, with two or three kitchen chairs, and some pots and pans. A man with very red cheeks, and whiskers, a rough coat, and a cap on, was sitting by the fire smoking; evidently he was a farmer. This was Gerald. Two maids (Madge and Dolly) were rubbing the chairs and tables very hard indeed.

"What is all this?" said Mr. Hilton. "Who is the farmer? He ought to be at work, too."

"Hush, please, father, you mustn't talk to them, please," said a voice from inside. There was a little shuffling, and then Robin, dressed like a page, stepped out with a low bow, and gravely handed pieces of paper to the audience, who most of them said, "Thank you, Master Robin," very politely; though Mrs. Joy added loudly, "Bless his dear little 'art, don't he look nice!" which rather disturbed his gravity.

The papers were printed—Gerald had a little press of his own that often came in useful.

BACK DRAWING-ROOM THEATRE.

THE MAID AND THE MAGPIE.

A New Play by L. and M. Hilton & Co.

ACT I. *The Farm.*
ACT II. *The Judge.*

FARMER	*Mr. G. Hilton.*
HIS WIFE	*Miss E. Carew.*
THE MAIDS, JESS AND BESS	*Miss M. Hilton.* / *Miss D. Hilton.*
THE MAN JIM	*Mr. F. Hilton.*
THE BOY JOE	*Mr. D. Hilton.*
THE JUDGE	*Mr. R. Hilton.*
THE LAWYERS	*Miss L. Hilton.* / *Mr. J. Hilton.*
THE POLICEMAN	*Mr. D. Hilton.*

Almost before they had time to read all this, a voice was heard in the distance, and the farmer's wife entered, with cheeks almost as red as her husband's, and a grand cap and apron; she began scolding the maids very vigorously—

Mistress. Come, come, you lazy things! What, not done yet!
And nearly time already tea to get.
Upon my word, I tell you this won't do.
I've done full half the work myself, while you
Two idle, lazy gadabouts for ever chatter,
Gossip and—

[*Here there was a sound of breaking china.*

, Now what is the matter?
Is that my best white china jug? I do declare
You two, between you, will turn white my hair!
That's the fifteenth you've broken since you came,
You little good-for-nothing—what's-your-name!
Bess (*crying*). Please 'm, I didn't for to do it go,
And how it came in halves I do not know;
I never touched it—hardly, not at all;
I don't know ever how it came to fall.
Mistress. Tut, tut, such stories! Have done crying, child,
Such ways of going on make me quite wild.
Jess. We've done our cleaning now, ma'am. Shall we sew?
Mistress. Yes, you had better. Hem this towel—but no;
First help me carry down the big plate-chest,
I want to clean it all before I rest.
There's all my silver in't—poor mother's pride,
I brought it with me when I came a bride;
John there, had ne'er a bit of silver to his name——
Master. And didn't want none, thank you all the same.
Mistress. There's gratitude for all I've done! My word—
(*Aside*) I shouldn't care, but those pert lassies heard.
Shame! Such a way to speak to your poor wife!
I tell you this, I'm weary of my life—
But like enough I'll soon be in my grave.
It's hard to toil, and scrub, and work, and talk, and save,
And never get a word of thanks—not one!
But what's the use of talking? I have done.
Master. I'm glad to hear it, for in truth you see,
You generally talk so much there's little chance for me.
[*One of the girls laugh. The Mistress turns round angrily.*

Mistress. Who was it laughed? Pert hussies, you shall learn
Who's mistress here.
Bess (*aside*). That's easy to discern—
Mistress and master too, as all can see.
(*Aloud*) It wasn't me who laughed, m'm.
Jess. No, nor me.

At this point a curious-looking bird appeared on the floor at one side of the stage. It was black, with a good deal of rather oddly-marked white about it. Daisy, who had been sitting very still in silent astonishment, suddenly clasped her little hands, and laughed aloud. "Why, Nursie," she cried, "dere's Jack's poor old stuffed Jackie dat we fought was lost. He's not lost at all, but dey've painted him white!"

And Frances, too, burst into a merry peal of laughter, and repeated after her, "Jackie not lost!"

"Hush, hush," said Mr. Hilton, "let us see what he is going to do."

[*The bird moved a little jerkily into the middle of the stage and stood there, and Bess caught sight of it.*
Bess. It must have been the magpie, ma'am, you heard.
Mistress (*doubtfully*). It may have been. Turn out the stupid bird.

Bess and Jess, both trying to drive it out, ran against each other, and against their

mistress, crying, "Shoo, shoo!" upsetting the chairs, and making a grand confusion, which caused Daisy and Frances to laugh again with delight; and at last the bird went out on the opposite side to that which it came in. Everybody stood still a minute panting.

Master. I'll go outside, I think, and have a pipe.
[*Goes out.*

Mistress. Jess, take a cloth, these chairs and tables wipe,
For what a mess! Bess, help me fetch the plate.
Look sharp, now, girl. You don't expect I'll wait?
[*They go out together; Jess is left alone.*

Jess. Look sharp? Small need for that while she is here,
She's sharp enough to sour all the beer.
Really, for any girl, this life's too wearing,
I often think it's almost past my bearing;
But for poor mother, who wants all I earn,
Upon the place my back I'd quickly turn.
'Tis scolding—morning, afternoon, and night,
And nothing that one ever does is right.
I know I try to please, but what's the use?
One nothing gets but crossness and abuse.
[*Jess does not see the Farmer, who has come back to the kitchen door. He stands there a minute, while she continues angrily—*
I often think I'd like to pay her out,
And so I shall some day, I've little doubt.
[*She stops speaking. The Farmer listens a minute or two longer, but as she says no more, he goes away shaking and nodding his head. After he is gone, Jess speaks again sorrowfully.*

I fear that was a wicked thing to say,
It would be wrong to harm her, any way.
No; I must try and please by duty done,
And hope she'll kinder grow as time goes on.

[*She sighs, and goes on with her work. The magpie comes in again and moves about the floor, but Jess takes no notice of him. The Mistress and Bess come back, carrying a box between them, which they set on a table.*

Mistress. Turn out that bird. He really is a trouble.

Bess. The master pets him, so he's made it double.

Mistress. Now, girls, you both shall have a pleasure great,
You shall behold my mother's treasured plate.

Bess (*aside*). H'm! On the whole 'twould give me greater pleasure
To have a plate of meat. 'Twould be a treasure
I've seldom seen, I know, since I came here.
(*Aloud.*) Shall I undo the box now, mistress dear?

Mistress (*sharply*). No! Keep your fingers off—you are not to touch;
Girls such as you I do not trust too much.

[*Jess turns indignantly away, and the Mistress opens the box and slowly takes out, one by one, some spoons, forks, and candlesticks, which she solemnly arranges in a row on the table, while Bess looks on, and the magpie comes in once more.*

Mistress. John did himself good when he married me.
I brought him all the wealth which here you see;
And more than that—five hundred pounds in gold,
Besides the riches that ne'er can be told.
I've saved and earned for him since here I came—
There's not a wife all round can say the same.

[*The girls toss their heads, but stand and look on while*

the Mistress takes up piece after piece, and handles them lovingly before she begins to clean it.

Jess. It hardly wants a cleaning, it's so bright.

Mistress. Not much, but then, you see, I like to keep it right.

You fetch the cloths, I'll clean it now,—and, Bess,
It's time the cows were getting milked, I guess.

[*Bess takes a pail and goes out. Jess brings the cloths, and then begins to sew; while the Mistress rubs each piece of silver carefully with some pink powder. The magpie moves about the floor.*

Mistress (*talking to herself*). I hope no beggar will come by to-day—
I'll set the table here out of the way.

[*She moves the table with the plate on it to one side almost out of sight.*

Now, if beggars should pass, 'twill be all right,
Unless they're right inside they'll catch no sight.

[*She goes on with the rubbing, still talking.*

I wonder where that idle man of mine is now?
He wants me after him, e'en at the plough.

[*The boy Joe comes running, panting up to the door.*

Joe. Missis, you're wanted. Come here quick, I pray.

Mistress. Just as I said, that always is the way!
What's wrong now, boy? Be quick and tell.
I greatly fear 'tis some disaster fell.

Boy. The cows are eating away in the corn,
And Bessie wishes they'd never been born.
She can't get them out, and, as I told her,
I know that when you come, you'll scold her.

Mistress. Aye, that I will. Was ever a woman so worried,
Flustered, bothered, bustled, and hurried?

Jess, you sit there; and mind, let no one in.

[*She knocks against the table in her haste, and upsets some spoons, picks up two and goes out, not seeing that some are still on the floor.*

Jess. Dear me! dear me! was ever such a din?
I must take care of all this precious stuff—

[*Rising and looking at the silver.*

It shines now, and looks bright and fine enough.
I wonder if it's worth a deal of money?
She sets such store by it—it's very funny.
Well, I'll sit here, just close beside the door,
Then no one can come in or out, I'm sure.

[*She sits down near the door, and goes on with her work; but she does not see the magpie, who appears at one side with a spoon in his beak, goes across the stage, disappears for a minute—comes back without it; appears with another and does the same, and then with a third. Meanwhile, Jess talks to herself.*

I wish poor mother'd grow a little stronger,
Maybe she will, now that the days are longer.
Heigh ho! If I was rich like these folks here,
You should have comfort then, my mother dear.
There's plenty here—a little might be spared,
And now and then with poorer neighbours shared.
It often seems too hard to be understood
Why some have everything; while others, just as good,
Must go without. Well, I should be content
If only mother now could pay her rent.
Money don't make folks happy I suppose.
If I had more I might grow cross—who knows?
(*Sings*) Oh dear, what can the matter be—
Dear, dear, what can the matter be?
Mistress is scolding again!

I promised to work, and to do all to please her—
She says I do nothing, but plague her and tease her.
I wish that a fit of good temper would seize her,
And keep her from scolding again.

Jim (*comes to the door*). Is Missis out?

Jess (*laughing*). Aye, that she is, and you
Can't come in till she's back. It's true!

Jim. Pray why is this?

Jess. I promised, none at all
Should enter till she came—that's all.

Jim. You only try to tease me.

Jess. No, Jim, no.
Indeed, I tell you Mistress did say so.

Jim. Nonsense! I must come in—there's work to do.

[*He tries to pass, but she will not let him.*

Jess. I promised that not one I would let through.

[*He is still trying to get in, when the Mistress comes up, panting and breathless.*

Mistress. The cows are out at last! What's up here now?
Jim, what d'you want? There's something wrong, I vow!

Jim. She wouldn't let me in, nor tell me why—
And that, you see, it sort of angered I.

Mistress (*coming in and going up to the table with the silver on it.*) You foolish fellow! Come in now, and then
Get to your work, and get you gone again.
I'm tired-out with driving that wild cow;
But I must finish this, and do it now.

[*Takes up the spoons and begins to count them.*

What's this! What's this! Of these there's only nine—
And there were twelve! Yes twelve! My twelve spoons! Mine!
Jess, who's been in? Don't tell me no one has,

For that's a story! Oh alas! alas!
You've let in thieves! I'm robbed—I am undone!
Jess (*timidly*). Mistress, indeed none has been in—not one.
Mistress. Then you have stolen them yourself—that's all.
Jim, keep her safe, while I your master call.
Thieves! robbers! thieves! Whatever shall I do?
John, come I pray. Who would have thought it, who?
[*Enter the Farmer, Bess, and Joe, hastily.*
Farmer. Here's a to-do! Whatever is the matter?
You are keeping up a most terrific clatter.
Mistress. Matter enough! No wonder I cry out,—
It's quite enough to make a dumb man shout.
Here, I am robbed!
Joe and Bess. Lor!
Farmer. Who's the thief, I pray?
Mistress. Why that girl Jessie standing there, I say.
Jess (*crying*). Indeed—indeed I'm not a thief. I've not
Taken the spoons, indeed.
Jim. I'll be shot
If she's a thief. Master, now look you here:
Jessie's as good a girl as ever stepped, I swear.
Master. How many's gone?
Mistress. Three! Three—the very best!
I must look sharp and lock away the rest,
Now we've got thieves. Who ever would suppose
She was a thief? (*pointing at Jessie*) Really one never knows.
I left her here in charge, feeling quite sure
That she was honest, even though she's poor.
She swears she has let no one in—not one,

And there are three of my best teaspoons gone.
Bess (*aside*). I don't believe that she's a thief, in spite
Of all your talk. Jessie knows wrong from right.
Mistress. What do you say, John? You don't speak a word.
Master. I've hardly had a chance yet to be heard.
Mistress (*impatiently*). Well!
Master (*slowly*). Jessie's a thief; to prison she must go;
And what the judge will say I do not know.
Jim. Master, what makes you sure of that? For I,
For one, believe it not. Jess, don't you cry.
Master. Only to-day I heard that bad girl say
She meant to serve her mistress out one day.

[*Jess, who had lifted up her head at Jim's words, hides her face in her hands, crying again.*

All (*speaking together*). Jessie a thief! Oh, fie! oh, fie! oh, fie!
Jim (*sturdily*). I don't believe it; no I don't, not I.
Joe. Eh! what a pity. I was fond of Jess—
She's more good-natured far than that there Bess.
Mistress. Joe, fetch the police: she must to prison go.
Till then, we'll lock her safely in the barn I trow.
Jess. Oh! my poor mother, what—what will she do?

[*All but Jim go out leading Jess, still crying. Jim, left alone, stands in the middle of the floor thinking. The magpie comes in and moves about.*

Jim. I'll find it out. It's some mistake all through.
Poor Jess was ne'er a thief,—that I declare.
I'll set her right before the world, I swear.

Here the folding-doors were shut. Everyone clapped their hands but Daisy, who said

sorrowfully, "Naughty Ella, naughty to make poor Madge cry."

"She won't cry next time you see her," said her father consolingly.

"You don't know what's tummin'," said Daisy, "nobody does. I shouldn't wonder if she cried all the time." But just then the clapping grew so loud that the doors were opened again; but instead of any of the actors appearing, there, on a table in the middle of the stage, stood—the magpie. The audience laughed. The doors were shut tight once more, and there were sounds of a great bustle from the other side of them.

Frances took advantage of the pause to fall fast asleep, but as Nurse and Hannah wanted to see the end as much as anybody, she was laid on the sofa beside her mother, and covered with a shawl.

"*I'm* not sleepy," said Daisy proudly, "not a bit." But she was a little tired before the doors were opened again, though the new scene was surprising enough to make her sit up and quite forget it.

Straight opposite the doors was a wonderful erection covered with crimson and fur—the

schoolroom table cloth and mother's old fur cloak—and on the top sat someone arrayed in scarlet—Gerald's dressing-gown—and a most wonderful wig made of tow and cotton-wool, that reached far down the shoulders. Out of the middle of this wig looked a very solemn little face with a severe frown, and Daisy stared with all her eyes, before she was sure enough to cry, "Why, it's Robin!" The frown looked for a minute as if it were going to change into a smile at hearing that, but Robin was equal to the occasion, and sat steady as a rock.

Two more figures in black gowns—the girls summer waterproofs—and with smaller wigs on, sat at a little table. A voice of someone unseen called, "Bring in the prisoner!" and there appeared at the side—first, poor Jess, under the charge of a policeman in a rather funny-looking tunic, and a grand helmet made of black paper; then the farmer and his wife and Bess, who appeared to be crying as she looked at Jess. The policeman put Jess behind two chairs placed cornerwise, so as to keep her in, and then made the others stand in a row, being very particular that they all stood

straight, and then one of the lawyers stood up and began—

Lawyer Fuff. May't please your lordship. This, the prisoner here,
Is a sad, bad girl, as I shall soon make clear,
May't please your lordship——
Judge. Why, what has she done?
Lawyer Bluff (*aside*). I don't suppose it pleases anyone.
Fuff. Don't interrupt. I know the court won't stand
Manners like yours—but to the thing in hand.
This girl, may't please your lordship, this young girl,
With looks so modest, hair in such nice curl,
Is just a thief—no more, and nothing less.
Her name, I'd have you all to know, is Jess.
Judge. What has she done?
Fuff. Why now, I come to that,
And here, may't please your lordship, 'tis quite pat.
She has a mistress who is both kind and good.
[*Jess, Bess, and the Farmer shrug their shoulders.*
The mistress has some plate, be't understood;
And thus it chanced, that one unlucky day
When cleaning it, the dame was called away—
Left it all safe, and charged this wicked lass
T'let no one in. But what then came to pass?
The dame comes back, and counts her treasure o'er—
Three spoons are gone, and neither less nor more.
The girl declares she has let no one in,
Says also, that she would not steal a pin.
But other thieves say that; it's very clear
That she's the thief, for no one else was near.
Bluff. I cannot say I think it clear at all,
Wait till you hear what I've to say, that's all.

Fuff. Have done. It's still my turn. Moreover she
Has got a mother.
Judge. But why—so have we.
Fuff. Her mother's poor, however, please my lord,
And wanting money both for bed and board.
Her rent besides, folks say, she cannot pay—
Jess took the spoons to help her, I dare say.
[*The Judge shakes his head slowly and sorrowfully.*
Judge. Is the good mistress here?
Mistress. Why yes, of course,
And tired, listening to his long discourse.
Jess took my spoons, as all most clearly shows,
And why you talk so much, why goodness knows!
Judge. Hush, woman! That is not the way to speak!
Mistress. Woman, indeed! You think I'm very meek!
But——
Lawyers and Policeman. Hush! hush! You must quite
quiet be,
And only speak when spoken to, you see.
Farmer (*aside*). That's a new rule for her! How very
nice,
If I could shut her up so in a trice!
Lawyer Fuff. Now tell me, you are sure the spoons were
right
When you went out that day?
Mistress. I'm quite sure, quite.
Lawyer Fuff. Farmer, what was't you heard the prisoner
say
But just before?
Farmer. Why, that some early day
She'd do her best to pay her mistress out.
Jess (*crying*). I didn't mean it, please.
Lawyer Fuff. There's little doubt,

You did not mean that any one should hear.
My lord, that is my case—I think it's clear.
[*Sits down.*

Lawyer Bluff (*standing up*). There's one remark that still
I'd like to make.
My learned friend has done his best to rake
His facts together, and distinctly show
This poor girl guilty; but, my lord, you know
The spoons have ne'er been found, and where could she
Have put them, in those minutes two or three?
There is no proof that she the spoons did touch;
Whoever thinks so, proves himself as much
A fool as he thinks her a knave, you see——

Fuff. Sir, do you mean to apply those words to me?

Bluff. Oh, not at all. Sit down, pray, and keep cool.
My lord knows that in all law 'tis the rule
Possession must be proved. Now all in vain
They've looked in Jessie's box, and looked again;
Searched all her pockets, looked in every hole
And corner, lifted every pan and bowl,
Where they could lie; but as I said before,
'Twas all in vain, and they must look once more,
And find those spoons too, ere they dare to say
That Jessie is the thief. My lord, I lay
My case before you, feeling very sure
That you will justice do, nor less nor more.

[*The Judge shakes his head again very slowly and sorrowfully.*

Bess (*crying*). She didn't do it, please my lord, I know.
Jessie is far too good e'er to do so.
[*The Judge shakes his head again.*

Bess (*angrily*). That gentleman who spoke, he chose to
call

Our mistress kind and good. She's not at all
Or kind or good; but very cross and bad.
She hates us both, I know——

Policeman. Hush! girl, you're mad!

Judge (*to Bess*). Now, tell me truly, do you think that a
Man, child, or woman, could get in that day
And Jess not see them? Answer straight and true.

Bess (*unwillingly*). Why, no, I don't see how they could
get through
The door, and her not see them, for I know
She sat quite close beside it. Oh dear, oh!
[*Crying again.*

Judge. She's guilty of the theft, I sadly fear.
But what she has herself to say, we'll hear.
Speak, girl!

Jess. Oh, please my lord, I would not take
What was not mine, for anybody's sake.
Indeed, I would not!

Mistress (*mocking her*). Ha! it's very fine
To talk like that of taking "what's not mine."
The spoons are gone, and who, bad girl, but you,
Could have got at them?

Farmer. That is very true.

Fuff. My lord, she's guilty, as you must perceive.
Send her to prison, to learn not to thieve.
[*Bess and Jess burst into loud sobs.*

Judge. Yes, it is true, she must to prison go.

Jess. Oh, my poor mother! Oh, please my lord, oh, no!

Bluff. My lord, your kind attention I would draw
To this. The spoons are not found yet. A flaw
In the case against us, which you really ought
To take some notice of, I should have thought.
[*Judge hesitates, and at last says, slowly,—*

Judge. Jess must to prison go, there is no doubt,
And when the spoons are found she can come out.

[*Lawyer Bluff sits down looking very angry. The Farmer and his Wife clap their hands. Jess and Bess cry and the Policeman advances to take Jess away, when there is a noise outside, and a voice is heard shouting—*

They're found! they're found! And I have got the thief.
Don't cry, poor Jess, I come to your relief.

[*Jim enters, carrying the spoons in one hand and the magpie in the other.*

All. Why, what is this?

Judge. What's this? Upon my word!

Jim. Here is the thief, my lord, this wicked bird.

All. The bird!

Jim. He stole the spoons, yes, that he did,
I found them in his nest quite safely hid.
Here are the spoons, now Jessie free may go.
I heard your lordship your own self say so.

Judge. Yes, she may go.

Jess. Oh, dear, I am so glad.

Jim. For me, I really am with joy half mad,—
I said I would find out the thief, you know.

Bluff. I said the spoons not being found did show
The prisoner was not guilty. Brother Fuff,
I'll hope you'll now allow I was right enough.

Fuff. Not right at all, as I at once will tell——

Judge. Hush! if you please, this case has ended well;
But we must not forget the thief's here still.

Mistress. That nasty bird, I'll wring his neck, I will.

Judge. No. If you please, dame, give to me the bird,
The sentence of the court must now be heard.
A thief like this we cannot let go free;

To prison he must go for his crime you see.
A wicker cage would nicely do, I think,
If you take care to give him food and drink.

Jess. And may we go?

Judge. Yes, to be sure. Begone,
And take my blessing with you every one.

Mistress. I couldn't have believed that I was wrong.
Well, I've a lesson learnt to serve me long.

[*They all join hands except the Judge, who sits still on his throne, and dance round once in a circle. Then Jim and Jess dance out together carrying the magpie, then the Policeman and Bess, then the Farmer and his Wife, then the two Lawyers together. The Judge being left alone, shook his head gravely, and the doors were shut.*

It was only for a moment, though. There was a great clapping and applause, and some one, Mr. Hilton I think, called out "The author, the author!" The doors were opened, and Leslie appeared, still in her wig and gown, made a polite bow, and vanished laughing. Then all the other actors in their turn were called for, particularly the magpie; and last of all the Judge, who made his bow very prettily, but instead of retiring like the others, forgot what he had been told to do, and ran out through the doors to his mother, crying, "Did you see me, mother—did you? Wasn't I grand? Did I say it all right?"

"Quite right, my darling. It was capital."

"And oh, my wig is so hot," continued Robin. "Did I look like a real—real judge, father?"

"Very like," said Mr. Hilton, laughing.

"And now," said his mother, "I propose that we all come to supper. That is the proper thing after the play, and it really is getting very late indeed." Frances was carried off to bed by this time, but Daisy came in. The actors all kept on their dresses, Robin would not hear of parting with the honour and dignity of his wig and gown, in spite of the heat. So they were a funny-looking party.

"It's a real supper," said Dolly, looking contentedly at the gay well-filled table.

"To be sure," said Fred with scorn. "Did you think it was all pretence?"

"I mean it's just like a grown-up supper," said Dolly.

It was a merry meal, whether it was like a grown-up supper or not.

Mr. Hilton made a speech, in which he proposed the health of the author and the actors, and thanked them all for the entertainment they had given.

"That's how father speaks," said Fred, "when he's talking in the Parliament. No wonder the Queen likes to listen to him."

Ella Carew, who was next him, laughed merrily at this. "Why, the Queen never goes to Parliament," she said, "except when she opens it."

"Does she open it her own self?" asked Robin in an awe-struck voice; "and does she shut it, too?" But Robin did not get his question answered just then, for Jack, as Lawyer Bluff, began a speech in answer to his father.

"Ladies and gentlemen; that is to say, father and mother, I have been asked to return thanks on behalf of my lord judge, my learned brother Fuff, the prisoner, the policeman, the farmer and his wife, and all the rest of us, for the very kind way in which you have drunk our health. Now I'm quite sure the farmer's wife would have been able to make you a much longer and better speech than I can, and I am sure she and her husband both think so too, but perhaps she would have found it hard not to have any scolding to do, so I must make the best I can of it. I beg to thank you very much for your

politeness, and though it may sound like praising ourselves, I may say that I am sure it would be hard to find a juster judge, a more pleasing policeman, more learned lawyers, a fatter farmer with a more worrying wife, a more puzzled prisoner, or a more innocent thief than we have had to-day. In conclusion, I beg to propose the health of the magpie."

"I think very likely Jack'll p'r'aps be in Parliament too, some day," said Fred thoughtfully, when the applause had stopped a little.

"Then I'll get him to take me to see the Queen undo the big door," observed Robin.

"But why," asked Dolly, "why did he call Fuff his learned brother? Leslie is his sister, not his brother."

"Oh, but don't you know that lawyers and clergymen call everybody their brothers," explained Fred. "Haven't you heard the clergyman on Sunday say to everybody, 'Dearly beloved brethren'?—that means brothers."

"But that's in the Prayer-book," said Dolly, rather shocked.

"Well, but—" But before Fred could produce any further explanation, the door opened

and Rogers the butler stepped in and announced that Mrs. Willis and Mademoiselle de Lasserre had arrived. Mrs. Hilton rose to go and meet them; and the supper and the evening came to an end together for most of the children. Robin's last thought as he laid his head on his pillow was an earnest wish that he could see the Queen open "the big door," and a wonder whether she had a gold key to unlock it with. No one knew till long, long afterwards what a deep impression this fanciful idea had made on the little boy's mind.

CHAPTER VI.

GOOD-BYE.

And so time had slipped by—all the quicker because they had been so busy—and father and mother's last day had really come.

It was a strange day to everyone. There were no lessons to do, although Mrs. Willis was sitting in the schoolroom. No one cared to stay there as they might perhaps have done if she had been alone, because sitting with her was the new French governess, Mademoiselle de Lasserre, of whom they all felt rather shy. Mother was obliged to rest most of the day, and Preston warned off very sharply indeed anyone who ventured to go near her door, or dared to make the least noise in the passage. It rained all the morning, too, so it was not even possible to go into the garden. The hall was getting full of boxes and packing-cases, and Fred with Dick and Dolly tried to amuse themselves by hopping from one to another,

but when Dolly had slipped to the ground between two of them with a loud scream and a crash, which brought both Rogers and Preston on the scene in a great hurry, that amusement was put a stop to. Dolly did not get much pity for her bruises, for Preston was much more concerned about the marks on the top of Mrs. Hilton's new trunk, and told her to go at once either to the nursery or the schoolroom and stay there. She chose the nursery as the least of two evils in the present state of things, and Dick of course went with her, both looking very dejected. What new mischief Fred would have found to do if left to himself will never be known, for luckily Gerald and Jack took him off with them to a sort of workshop they had in one of the stable lofts, and there was comparative peace in the house. Leslie had shut herself up in her room with a book, and when Dick and Dolly reached the nursery, whither they went as slowly as they could, loitering as much as ever they dared on the stairs and in the passages, they found Madge there before them, which pleased them, if no one else.

Nurse had been summoned to give her advice

on some matter about the packing, and Madge had fancied she could get through this sad, strange morning better in playing with Daisy and Frances than in any other way, but she had not bargained to have Dick and Dolly as well as Robin and the babies.

"Go away; Madge is telling a story," cried Robin when they appeared. "We don't want nobody else." And Madge quite shared the sentiment.

"Preston sent us here, and said we were to stop," said Dolly dolefully. "So we must, and——"

"Then you mustn't int'rupt us," said Robin —"that's all. Go on, Madge."

"*Do* on, Madge," echoed Daisy; and Madge continued:—

"And so this poor little boy had neither father nor mother; and he had no money and no food and nothing to do to get any, but to sweep the mud off a crossing, and ask for pennies."

"Oh I know that story," cried Dick. "It's a horrid stupid one. Tell another, Madge."

"No, no, no!" cried the other. "He's not to stop it, Madge. We like it."

"You needn't listen, Dick."

"I shan't."

"You might tell a fairy story, Madge, instead," asked Dolly, fretfully. "I hate stories like that with no fairies."

"*You* don't know," said Robin with great scorn. "P'r'aps it'll turn into a fairy story. Stories often do, though they don't begin like it. Will it, Madge?"

"Perhaps," said Madge. But Dolly did not think it worth while to wait on the chance, and went over to the window, where she stood a long time, watching the rain drops chase each other down the panes.

Madge, sitting with her back to the window, with Frances on her lap and Daisy and Robin very close beside her, pursued the fortunes of her little crossing sweeper, and had just made him pick up a purse belonging to the Princess of Wales's eldest little daughter, when it suddenly struck her that considering they were not listening, both Dick and Dolly were most wonderfully quiet.

"Wait one minute," she said, "I'll go on directly," and putting Frances into her own chair she went over to the window.

Alas for poor Madge! No wonder the two little monkeys were so quiet! When Madge came to the nursery, she had brought with her an illuminated card which Ella Carew had lent her to copy. She had already with great care and pains traced the outline, and after showing it to the little ones, had laid it down on the work-table in the window, together with Leslie's paint-box, which she had borrowed, meaning to take them to her own room by-and-by. She had quite forgotten them in the effort to make her story amusing and exciting, and now in what state did she see her card—her cherished card which she had had secret hopes of making lovely enough to be worth sending all the way to New Zealand for her mother's birthday?

Dick and Dolly had opened Leslie's paint-box, and dipping the brushes in some water that had trickled down inside the window, were busily colouring the card, both painting at once, and fancying that they were copying Ella's illumination. The paint-box was in an indescribable mess, and the card, it is needless to say, was one mass of smears and blotches.

Madge completely lost her temper. She

seized the card with one hand, crying, "Oh, you naughty children! How dare you touch it? It's quite—quite spoilt," and with the other hand she gave Dick, who was nearest her, a sharp box on the ear.

She had never done such a thing in her life before. Dick was so utterly astonished that he sat for a whole minute with his mouth wide open before it occurred to him that a good loud cry would relieve his feelings, and that he was quite enough hurt to be entitled to it. The little ones, who of course were looking on, were frightened at Madge's white face and Dick's crying, and Frances and Daisy began to cry, too. Robin exclaimed loudly, "You *are* a naughty boy, Dick. It's very, very naughty to spoil Madge's things. I'm glad you're crying;" and Dolly, with crimson cheeks, started up as if to defend Dick.

She need not have troubled herself. Madge's hasty blow was no sooner given than it was repented of. She was angry with the children still, but I do not think she had ever been so much ashamed of herself as she was at that minute. She could have sat

down and cried too, not for the spoiling of her card, but because she was so heartily vexed with herself and so ashamed of having lost her temper. Was this the way in which she was beginning to set a good example to the little ones, and do all she could for them while her mother was away? She fancied that Frances and Daisy looked half-afraid of her through their tears, and she looked at Dolly's and Robin's angry faces—Dolly angry with her, and Robin with Dick—feeling as though she had done more harm in an instant by that hasty blow, than she could undo in a very long time, no matter how good she might try to be to them all.

"I'm very sorry, Dick," she began falteringly, putting her hand on his shoulder; but Dick's anger was not to be so easily appeased. He shrugged his shoulder away from under her hand rather sulkily.

"Don't say you're sorry, Madge," cried Robin, with shining eyes, eager to defend her. "He is naughty. I'm glad you hurted him!"

"*Oh! oh!*" observed Dolly, in shocked tones, drawing out the words and opening her mouth very wide indeed.

"It's velly rude, Dolly, to open your mouth so big as that," continued excited Robin, "Isn't it, Madge? Nurse always says so."

"Oh, hush, dear," said poor Madge, feeling more and more sorry every moment for what she had done, but before she could say any more the door opened, and Nurse came in.

"Why, what's the matter?" she exclaimed looking at the tearful and angry faces. "Master Dick, I'm sure it's you. Have you been making Miss Daisy and Miss Frances cry?"

"No, indeed!" cried Dick and Dolly. "It was Madge."

"Never!" said Nurse, who was very fond of Madge. "I don't believe that, any way."

Madge did not attempt to speak.

"No," cried Dolly; "but Madge is naughty! She hit Dick ever—ever so hard, just only for nothing; and he cried, and that made the babies cry."

"It wasn't for nothing!" said Robin. "He's been an' spoilt her beauty card that she was going to paint her own self. Look!" and he seized the unlucky card—spoilt indeed.

"Just look at your frock, Miss Dolly!" cried Nurse, catching sight of a good many paint

stains, "and Master Dick's collar, too. There never were such troublesome children as you two. Who's to get out those stains, I should like to know? I'm sure whatever Miss Madge did to you, you deserved it. You two are the provokingest—" and forthwith Nurse carried off Daisy and Frances for their morning sleep, and Dick and Dolly to be made tidy in the next room, where her voice might be heard going on scolding like distant thunder for some time.

Nurse's words did not comfort Madge a bit, however. She left the nursery and went slowly downstairs. She did not want to go to her own room where Leslie was, nor was she at all inclined to go to the schoolroom. The sight of the boxes in the hall made her worse than ever. She was just feeling utterly wretched and as if she must find a quiet corner somewhere and have a good cry about everything, and yet that there was not one quiet corner in the whole house, when a sudden gleam of sunshine through the staircase window startled her. It had—yes, it actually had stopped raining. Then she could go out to the boys! What a cheering thought! As

quickly as possible she ran to the cloak-room, got her goloshes, garden hat, and jacket, and made her way out to the workshop. Only Gerald was there. He was sitting on the table with his hands in his pockets, whistling, and apparently doing nothing but staring hard at the shavings on the floor.

"Oh, Gerald," cried Madge, "Jack and Fred are not here, then! I'm so glad."

"No, they've gone off somewhere. Why? what's up now?" as he caught sight of her face.

"Oh! it's just as you said the other day," said Madge, settling herself on a three-legged stool at his feet, with a deep sigh. "It's everything. Oh, Gerald, I wish you weren't going away, too; and now, as if it was not all bad enough, I've gone and been so hateful to Dick in the nursery."

"I dare say he deserved it—little beggar," said Gerald. "He's got plenty of cheek."

"No, don't say that, please," said poor Madge. "I got in such a passion with him, and I gave him a box on the ear. It makes me angry still to think what he did; but oh, I wish I hadn't done that!"

"What had he been up to?" inquired Gerald.

"He and Dolly had quite spoilt that card I showed you last night—quite spoilt it! They knew they had no right to touch it—but still—" and Madge's grief became too much for her. Her tears began to flow fast.

Gerald's private opinion still was that Dick richly deserved all he had got, but he saw that Madge's distress was very real, and knew that it would not comfort her to hear that he thought so.

"It was a pity, perhaps," he said, hesitatingly, "but don't cry so, Madgie. He'll have forgotten it in half-an-hour."

Madge shook her head.

"Yes, he will. He'll be just as good friends with you as ever by tea-time."

"Dick isn't that sort of boy," said Madge, with a deep sigh while she dried her eyes. "He keeps angry a long time, and then besides, Dolly is angry with me too, and Robin is in a rage with Dick and Dolly, and the babies have been crying. It's all horrid, and I meant to have been so good while mother and father were away!"

"So you can still," said Gerald, shortly.

"Oh, Gerald! with such a bad beginning! How can I?"

"It is the beginning," said Gerald, "it's not the end; and it needn't be all like the beginning, need it?"

"No—perhaps not; but it will make it so much harder, and it was so hateful of me to be cross just now."

"That can't be helped now," said Gerald, "but still—" he stopped there, as if it were not easy to find words. "Being harder does not make it impossible," he said at last, bluntly.

Madge gave a deep sigh and did not speak, but she looked a little less unhappy. She sometimes thought that Gerald was the very wisest person she knew, and certainly he had managed now to give her thoughts a right direction, for, as they sat together in silence, she was renewing, with all her strength—and not with her own strength alone—her resolves to try and do right, however hard it might be; determining to try and remember that she had made it harder for herself than it need have been, but that at any rate the end need not, and should not, be like the beginning.

Gerald broke the silence at last. "We start at four o'clock," he said.

"Yes, this is the very longest day I ever knew," said Madge mournfully, "and yet we shall be awfully sorry when it's over and gone."

"I shan't," said Gerald. "Once they are gone, I shall be glad to be back at school."

"Oh yes! School must be better than being here without father or mother."

"Never mind, Madge, it's not so very long till the holidays, and that'll be jolly enough."

"And after that you go to Eton!"

"Yes, just to think, I shall be an Eton fellow before father comes back," and Gerald's eyes brightened. To be at Eton had long been the keenest desire of his life, and until lately it had not been, so far as he knew, a settled matter; but now he was to go after the Christmas holidays.

"Yes, that is something to look forward to for you"—Madge knew how he felt about it—"but there is almost nothing for us."

"There's their coming back."

"Yes, and perhaps mother's coming back well. If we were sure of that one wouldn't

mind anything—*anything*," said Madge, with all the emphasis her lips were capable of.

"She will," said Gerald, hopefully. "Why, there's the gong! It must be two o'clock."

"And we are not ready," said Madge, jumping up, and hastily beginning to shake sawdust and shavings off her frock, "and Aunt Lilia was to come to luncheon, too!"

Both children made off as quickly as possible, for their father was at home, and to be late for meals was even more of a crime with him than with the governess. They were fortunate to-day, though, for Aunt Lilia had been a little late in arriving, and luncheon was delayed a few minutes for her, so they both managed to get themselves prepared, and quite ready before their father was in the dining-room.

As she looked round the room, Madge missed Dick—both the governesses were there waiting, and all the schoolroom children but Dick. Mrs. Hilton was not coming down; they were only waiting for Mr. Hilton and Aunt Lilia. She knew her father would be vexed if anyone were not in time to-day. Dolly was there, but Madge did not like to ask her any questions, for her round face still wore a rather indignant

pout. Madge tried Robin, asking in a whisper if he knew where Dick was.

But Robin answered in a loud tone, evidently meant to be heard by everyone, "I don't know. He's a vewy naughty boy not to be dwessed."

Madge hushed him as much as she could, and then tried Fred.

"He's playing in the stable yard. I told him to come, but he said there was lots of time."

Madge glanced round the room. Could she slip away and call him? Yes, she could go, but then she ran the risk of being late herself, and of displeasing her father, besides missing Aunt Lilia when she came down—dear Aunt Lilia, who would wonder why Madge, her own special child, was not there to meet her. It only took a second to think all this, and some other thoughts too, which made Madge slip hurriedly out of the room, though Leslie called after her, "Madge, Madge, where are you going? Aunt Lilia is just coming."

Happily, Mrs. Willis did not hear, or she might have been stopped. She flew along the passages and round to the stable yard, where sure enough was Dick, very contentedly playing

ball against the wall. It did not take a minute to tell him the state of things, and then he was rather in a fright, for troublesome as he might be with nurses or governesses, he did not care to anger his father. Madge hurried upstairs again, to assist at the very necessary washing of hands and change of collar—another clean collar! poor Nurse!—and though he did not thank her in words, he held up his face for a kiss, and all was right again between them.

They hurried down together, but too late. Dinner had begun. Madge laid her hand on the door timidly; and then Rogers opened it, and held it wide for the two children. Yes, Aunt Lilia was there, looking so delightful and kind, but their father looked up at them with displeasure.

"Late! children," he said. "I did not think anyone would have been late to-day. No—go to your places, now," he added, as they moved towards Aunt Lilia. "You should have been here when your aunt arrived;" and very dejectedly Madge and Dick took their places with hanging heads and hot cheeks, and without the kiss from Aunt Lilia that Madge was longing for.

Perhaps she had a faint hope that Dick would say it was not her fault, but the little boy did not speak. It was a little hard, but she had known what she risked when she went for him, and, at any rate, Dick had forgiven her. That was something, but still there was a lump in her throat that would not go, and she could hardly speak, even when her father offered all the girls and the little boys sixpence apiece when he returned, for every proposition in Euclid learnt so that it could be said without a mistake, and a penny for every definition.

The little boys instantly began counting up how much they might hope to get, and Madge, who did not find Euclid so very difficult, made a mental calculation too, which was rather cheering. French speaking had been stopped for the day, which always made the meal much longer, as people in general talked so very much more; but it was over at last. Everybody rose, and as they left the dining-room, Madge crept shyly to Aunt Lilia's side.

A kind hand was held out to her at once, and the low question, "How was it, dear?" brought out Madge's story in a whisper, and then a very tender embrace sent her away comforted

and wondering why everybody was not as nice as Aunt Lilia, just as about half-a-dozen voices from different directions began impatiently calling the said Aunt Lilia, and she had to hurry off to see what was wanted and try and pacify everyone.

Then followed an hour of bewildering confusion and bustle downstairs, ending with a great many sorrowful farewells and kisses, as Mrs. Hilton had the children up to her room, one or two at a time, to say a few last words, and wish them good-bye.

By five minutes past four it was over—they were all gone, boys and all. I shall not try and tell you how that strange melancholy evening passed away. It seemed almost impossible to believe that for a whole year neither father nor mother would be seen again, and the children wandered about in very dejected fashion. Mrs. Willis was very sorry for them, and meant to be very kind, but perhaps Nurse was wisest of all when she announced that in her opinion everyone had better go to bed early, and moreover, carried her opinion into practice, as far as lay in her power.

CHAPTER VII.

A DULL TIME.

And now began a time that for the children really was very dreary. All the excited feeling that had been kept up before their mother's departure was over. The boys were away, there was nothing particular to look forward to; they were all, especially the elder ones, feeling sad and missing their mother very much, and they were obliged to settle down into the dull routine of lessons, with little or nothing to give them any variety. Such dreary times when everything seems rather blank and uninteresting are apt to come now and then to grown-up folks as well as to children, and very trying indeed they are. Still it cannot be helped—they will come; the only thing is to find out how to make the best of them.

It cannot be said that Leslie Hilton did this. Nay, she rather made the worst of matters, and increased Mrs. Willis's difficulties as well

as her own discomforts. Certainly, all the schoolroom children thought they never before had known Mrs. Willis to be so strict—"so tiresome," they called it—and having two governesses, instead of one, made a great difference. A good many little odd corners of time, that had been available for story-books, or play, or pleasant aimless idling, were seized upon and used up by Mademoiselle de Lasserre. But then, if Leslie had really been so anxious to get on with her studies as she professed to be when she wished for another governess instead of Mrs. Willis, she would have been glad of this, and neither have grumbled herself, nor have encouraged the little ones in grumbling. Moreover, she was really old enough to know and understand that if Mrs. Willis were more strict, it was because she felt her responsibilities were heavier now both Mr. and Mrs. Hilton were away.

Madge, though younger, and often giddy and thoughtless, had some vague idea of this, and sometimes tried to express what she felt about it, but Leslie would not understand or listen, and it was of little use. Leslie, like many older

people, did not know how much influence she had on those around her. She thought when she grumbled at Mrs. Willis's orders, shirked some regulation because she thought it was absurd, or went to the very edge of actual open disobedience, that it was a matter that concerned herself only. She did not, or would not, see that the little ones copied everything she did and said, that they were encouraged almost to rebel against Mrs. Willis, and certainly to treat Mademoiselle de Lasserre, when they were alone with her, as if she had no authority over them at all.

Mademoiselle de Lasserre was very young to be a governess—quite too young, Leslie thought, to teach a young lady of her years.

"I know she's not one-and-twenty yet," she said one day to Madge, in one of their many talks over things in general. "I'm sure she's only nineteen. Fancy! only five years older than I am!"

She did not notice that Fred was listening with all his ears, till he broke in—"Is a person not one-and-twenty not really grown up?"

"Oh yes, they are grown up in a sort of way," said Madge. "Aren't they, Leslie?"

"Yes, but not really. Until they are one-and-twenty they are called infants."

"Oh!" said Master Fred; and he seemed to meditate on the information he had received.

A few days later, Mrs. Willis being out of the way, Fred wishing, as he would have said, "to pay off Mademoiselle" for something or other, began politely to observe, "You aren't fit to teach us, Mademoiselle."

"*Mais parlez Français, Fredéric,*" returned Mademoiselle, more intent on his having spoken English than on what he said.

"*Je ne puis pas,*" replied Fred. "I don't know how to say it. You're too *jeune* to teach us, mademoiselle. You are only an infant —that's all you are."

"*Mais qu'est-ce qu'il dit?*" asked Mademoiselle, whose English was no better than Fred's French, and Fred and Dolly, both bursting with only half-suppressed laughter, tried to explain to her what he meant.

"But dat does not seem to me to be of the most polite way to speak," began poor Mademoiselle in English, having discovered that Fred meant to be impertinent. "An infant,

dat is a *bébé*, a little child! Dat is not what you should call me."

"But you are only an infant," persisted Fred; "I know, for Leslie says so."

"No mattare what Leslie say, you must not say dose tings to me. It is no affairs of yours, my age."

"But how old are you, Mademoiselle?" asked Robin curiously, looking up from his play on the floor. He did not speak impertinently as Fred had done, and Mademoiselle stopped an instant before she answered him.

"I have only eighteen years," she answered slowly in English, "and Frederic has only nine, but that is old enough both of us for to know that he has spoken to me as it is not good he should."

Fred was rather abashed, and only muttered something under his breath. But ever after this it was a sort of understood thing among the little ones that Leslie had said that they need not mind Mademoiselle, because she was only an infant; and whenever Mrs. Willis was not with them, they were very apt to be tiresome, inattentive, and almost disobedient to her. Leslie would have been surprised indeed if she

had known what was asserted in her name, but she kept away from the little ones and the governesses just now as much as she could.

Madge was having a hard time of it. Not only had it never been, as she put it, "so awfully difficult to be good," but in her efforts to be good herself and to keep the little ones right, she had a horrid uncomfortable feeling as if she were "taking sides" against Leslie with the governess, and as if Leslie might accuse her of deserting her and of being disloyal. Madge's heart was very true to all whom she loved. It was great pain to her to go against Leslie, even when she thought her in the wrong; and she had most uncomfortable, confused feelings when Leslie accused her of unkindness in not taking her part. In fact, but for some thoughts she had had before her mother went away, and the resolutions she had made then, Madge would hardly have known how to get on at all. Her practising was never slurred over now, nor one minute of the time wasted—that was one good thing. It was a pity that the same could not be said of Leslie's work, but it was not so. She was letting herself get more and more into careless, indifferent ways, thinking

"it didn't matter—it didn't matter," till there was scarcely one thing that she did honestly with her whole heart, and all because she chose to fancy that she ought not to have been left under Mrs. Willis's care.

In fact, at this time, except Madge and little Robin, who stood by her in everything, none of the schoolroom children were doing their best, or anything like it.

However, comfortably or uncomfortably, time went on. The garden began to look untidy with fallen leaves. Nurse and Mrs. Willis were apt to say that it was getting too damp to play there after tea—a decree which the little ones resented very much, and made an excuse for being often late for that meal.

About this time Fred had a cold—not a bad one—which kept him in the house, but a little one, which was just enough to make Nurse "fuss over him," as he called it. One thing she was quite firm about; she would not let him play on the grass when he went out.

"It's no use your talking, Master Fred," she said. "The grass *is* wet. Why, it rained last night a perfect Noah's deluge, it did; and if you go out at all you must stay on the

gravel walks or in the yard. Miss Leslie, you look after him, and see he does as I tell him."

"Oh yes," said Leslie absently, almost without looking up from her story-book; and when they were out Fred did not find her a very attentive guardian.

He did not mean to be disobedient,—he was not going on the grass,—only as Madge was playing with the more lucky Dick, Dolly, and Robin under the trees, and as Leslie had got a story-book which quite engrossed her eyes and thoughts as she paced up and down the long gravel walk, he did not see why he should not find some amusement for himself.

Indeed, he had a great scheme all ready, if only he could carry it out unobserved.

"I'm going into the yard, Les," he said, when he saw she was well absorbed in her book.

"Very well," said Leslie indifferently, scarcely hearing him, and off set Fred.

His quick eyes had discovered a break in one of the walls of an outhouse in the yard a day or two ago, and he hoped at last to be able to carry out a cherished project. Possibly,

if Mr. Hilton had been at home the damage would have been already noticed and repaired, but as it was, no one but Fred seemed to have set eyes upon it.

Yes, it was just where he had hoped it was, when he saw it from a garret window the day before yesterday. Two stones were dislodged at the end of the wall, so that there was footing for any adventurous climber. It was quite easy, unseen from kitchen, or nursery, or schoolroom windows, to mount on the dog's kennel, from there on to a low wall, from the wall on to the coal-shed roof, from that roof on to that of another out-building ; but there, even the most adventurous of the children had always been stopped. Yet, if only they could have got one step further it would have been easy to reach the roof of the house itself; but a bit of straight up-and-down unbroken wall had always stopped them. Now, however, some workmen who had been repairing the water-pipes had removed two or three stones, the masons had not been sent for yet to reset them, and Fred found he could quite easily scramble up. Panting more with excitement than with the climb, he found himself on the

kitchen roof. Very softly he crept along, for fear that terrible person, Cook, should wonder what was the odd noise over her head, and come out to see what was the matter. In a few minutes he had reached the point where, from below, it looked as if the kitchen roof joined the main roof of the house.

But here there was an unexpected obstacle. Between the two roofs there was a sort of gutter, more than three feet deep, and looking as if one might get a nasty tumble in trying to get over it, if one happened to fall in.

But Fred, having come so far, was not to be daunted by this.

"Oho!" he said to himself, "I see now where all our balls and things get to when we play fives in the yard and they fall on this roof. Yes," peering in, "there's the one Dick lost yesterday. I'll bring up a stick to-morrow and get it. But now, how can I get across?"

There was nothing for it but to take a bold step and run the risk of falling in; but by throwing himself well forward on the slope of the opposite roof he managed to avoid this

danger,—and there he was, triumphant on the main roof of the house.

Three or four more steps took him to the side of the house over the front door. A low parapet ran along the outside of the roof on three sides, so that he was in no danger of falling off. He could lie down behind it and remain quite hidden, and at the same time he could see all that went on in the garden, yard, or fields; and even away down the avenue, and along the highroad, and across the common beyond.

It was a most glorious place. He could see Dick and Dolly, Robin and Madge at the swing; he could hear all they said as their voices rose through the clear air. He would have shouted to them but for fear that someone else might hear, and his own secret be found out—and how glad he was that he had not called out, when, on looking round, he saw Polly the kitchen-maid at the coal-shed. He lay very still in his hiding-place till she had gone, for she would certainly have told Cook if she had seen him, and then Nurse, or Rogers, or Mrs. Willis would have heard of it, and all his fun would have been ended.

Soon she was gone, and he ventured to lift his head again. How jolly it was up there! The tops of the trees looked so near him—the brown and yellow leaves were so bright in the sunshine—he felt almost like a bird perched up so high, and as if one hop would have carried him to the top of the big elm.

But however jolly it was, it would not do to stay too long. He must get down, for fear "they" should wonder where he was and begin to look for him; and by "they" Fred always meant all those people who had any rightful authority over him and his doings. He must get down very cautiously, too; it would never do to be caught just coming down. Crossing the chasm was less difficult in going back; the kitchen roof was safely passed, the broken wall scrambled down, and he was on the familiar outhouse roof again. From that point all was easy and well known. In two minutes more he was safe on the ground by the kennel—and undiscovered. He ran round the house, almost running against Leslie, who said, "I was just coming to look for you; it is teatime." But she did not ask

him where he had been or notice his excited looks.

Neither did Nurse ask when he assured her he had not been on the grass at all; though she grumbled a good deal at the state of his jacket, and wondered how on earth he managed to get so much dirt upon him.

Next day Fred confided to Dick and Dolly that he had a grand secret; but it was wet, so nothing could be done. He had decided not to tell Robin, as he was too small; and though he generally liked to tell Madge everything, he had rather an uneasy feeling that she might not quite approve of this exploit, so Dick and Dolly were to be the only sharers in the discovery. The children thought Madge had grown more particular, and Madge felt it rather one of the hard things of trying to do right that they did not tell her everything as they once used to do.

The following day was Saturday,—very fine, too,—and a grand opportunity, for they might play in the garden all the afternoon without any one troubling them. Robin was not well, and was kept in the house, and Leslie and Madge were spending the day with Ella, whose grand-

mother had just decided to go abroad for a month, so that they would not see her for some time to come, which was a fresh trouble. Fred made the others promise faithfully not to tell: they had, what they thought, delightful fun, though older people might have wondered what was the exact pleasure of it; and from that day all three spent a good deal of time upon the roof.

It was wonderful that they were not found out. But though one or two of the servants had complained of odd noises over their heads, and though Cook had declared the slates in the kitchen roof must all be broken together, —and no doubt a good many were broken by small booted feet,—no one found out the new pastime, and all sorts of treasures were kept up there.

At length there came a day—it was a Saturday—when Uncle Harry was expected to come down and visit them. He had been away for his holiday, so they had not seen him since Mr. and Mrs. Hilton left, and, as he was a great favourite, they were all delighted at the thought.

"We won't go up you know where to-day,"

whispered Fred mysteriously to his two allies. "Uncle Harry might come while we were up, you know." So they played in the garden. They never ventured to give their new playground its proper name, for fear someone might hear. They called it "that place," "you know where," or gave it grand names like "Elysium," or the "Enchanted Island," according to the fancy of the moment.

It was a fine afternoon, though cloudy, and they all dispersed about, after various amusements, trusting to Rogers' promise to ring the big bell when Uncle Harry arrived, if they did not come.

Rogers had no need to keep his promise, for Madge had stationed herself at the gate, to be on the look-out, and her delighted shriek of welcome, as the dog-cart appeared with Uncle Harry driving it, served as well as any bell to summon the others. A largish crowd was gathered round Uncle Harry almost before he could alight, and questions and remarks were poured out upon him in a bewildering stream. He was only allowed just to shake hands with Mrs. Willis, and be introduced to Mademoiselle, before he was dragged off to the garden to all

their favourite haunts, where they could have him quite to themselves. I rather think that Mrs. Willis gave a sigh of satisfaction as the noisy group disappeared round the corner; for an hour or two she felt herself relieved of her responsibilities.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNCLE HARRY.

"And how did you come down, Uncle Harry?" was one of the first questions that disentangled itself clearly from the babel of tongues, when Uncle Harry was settled on the biggest garden seat, with Leslie and Madge seated one on each side of him, and all the others clustered about anyhow.

"In the dog-cart. Did you not see me?"

"But all the way from London?" said another.

"To be sure; it is not so very far."

"And are you going back so, too? Oh, do take us a little bit of the way!" besought Fred and Dick.

"Nonsense, children! Of course Uncle Harry won't go till quite late, after you are in bed," said Leslie, with dignity.

"Oh, but we must sit up to-night—just

to-night," began the pleading voices. But Uncle Harry struck in—

"I don't quite know about going back, Leslie I thought, perhaps, if it suited Mrs. Willis and you, or whoever is lady of the house at present, I might have managed to stay till Monday. Eh, what do you think?"

"Oh, jolly!"

"Delightful!"

"Glorious!"

"I'm so glad," was the general chorus, but Leslie did not speak.

"Uncle Harry thinks I ought to be mistress of the house," was the comment she made in her wilful heart on his half-joking words. "And so I ought!"

"But if so," continued Uncle Harry, "I think I must send a telegram to London. Where is the nearest post-office?"

"At Sarah Jones's," said Robin. "She is such a nice woman, Uncle Harry."

"Is she? And where may this nice woman happen to live?"

"In the High Street down in the village, —Robin is so silly," said Leslie, with some scorn.

"I'm not silly!" said Robin, stoutly. "She *is* nice."

"Well, never mind that now. I suppose I can have some company as far as the High Street?"

"Yes, yes! Oh yes!"

"All of us, Uncle Harry?"

"If you like. But first, Leslie, had you not better speak to Mrs. Willis, and tell her that if it is not inconvenient, I should like to stay till Monday; and say that if she has no objection, you are going as far as the village with me."

"Madge can go, I don't want to go," said Leslie, her fair face still clouded with discontent; and though Madge was a little surprised at her tone, and had no notion what was the matter, she flew off, nothing loath.

But in a few minutes she came back with slower feet. She knew she was bringing a disappointment to some people.

"Please, Uncle Harry, Mrs. Willis says she is very glad you can stay till Monday, but she thinks it is too far for the twins and Robin to go to the village again to-day, as

they had a long walk this morning. We elder ones may go, she says."

Groans of deep disappointment and disgust broke from the younger ones.

"It is too bad, it is!"

"As if we couldn't walk three times as far as that stupid little way!"

Uncle Harry looked and felt sorry.

"Never mind," he said cheeringly, "we shall be back to tea."

"And we've not heard one story," said Dolly, "and you are sure to tell the others lots!"

"Tell one before you start, Uncle Harry," cried Robin.

"It must be a short one, then, for we must be off soon. I think it will rain before long."

"A robber story, a robber story!" cried Dick.

"A brigand story if you like. You know I was in Italy in the spring—the country most troubled with brigands."

"'Brigands' sounds nicer than 'robbers' a good deal," said Dolly, a little consoled. "Go on, please."

"But it's just the very same thing, for all that," remarked Robin, while Uncle Harry began thus—

"You heard, I daresay, that I took my holiday this year in Italy. At first I intended to have visited North Italy only, but my friend Archer persuaded me to prolong our journey, and visit Rome, Naples, and Sicily as well. I must not stop to tell you of our travels, but just hurry on to the brigand bit. We were staying at Palermo, and enjoying ourselves uncommonly,—at least I was,—when one day, Archer, who is a restless sort of fellow who can never be still,—rather like Fred here,—announced one morning that there was one drive we ought to take, and in fact we must take it—round the Monte Pellegrino, to see the view from the other side.

"He told our landlord our plans, or rather his plans, for I, being very lazy, had nothing to do with making them; and at once the landlord put on a look of the utmost horror.

"'But, gentlemen,' he exclaimed, 'you do not know then, surely, that that road is infested with brigands? Let me implore you for your own sakes, for my sake, by the love of all the saints, not to run into such danger!' And he poured out endless entreaties to us not to go, and explanations of the risk we should run,

which only had the effect of making Archer more determined than before.

"At length, finding his words of no avail, the landlord gave way, and agreed to order a carriage for us for the next day. I somehow fancied I saw a sort of twinkle of gratification on his face as he did so, but perhaps I was wrong.

"'Since we are to go,' I said to Archer that night, 'I hope you'll get out those revolvers.' We had brought a case with us, and it had never even been opened yet, but lay at the bottom of Archer's trunk.

"'All right,' he said, and we separated for the night.

"We were to start next morning at eight, while it was still moderately cool; and a little before that Archer came hastily to my room.

"'Here are the revolvers,' he said, 'but the case of cartridges is not there!'

"'Not there? Nonsense!'

"'Fact, I am sorry to say. I must have taken out the case when I turned out my trunk in Rome, and have forgotten to put it back.'

"'Well,' said I, 'let us take the revolvers with us at any rate. Even though empty, they

will serve to point at a brigand's head, and terrify him.'

"'Or to thrust at him if we come to close quarters,' said Archer, laughing. We had no great opinion of the courage of these brigand gentlemen from all we had heard of them.

"At eight o'clock we set out, our driver being certainly one of the ugliest, most villainous-looking Italians I had ever seen. For some hours our journey was quite uneventful; then, when in a very lonely part of the country, our driver began to look about him on all sides, and to look behind him in an odd sort of way, driving at the same time very fast. We thought this a little peculiar, but presently he turned round to us, and with much politeness inquired if we were armed, adding that he only asked because the brigands were so dangerous in those parts.

"'Yes,' I answered sternly and promptly; 'we carry two revolvers each,' and, lifting them up, I showed him their muzzles, and kept one in my hand while Archer took the other.

"With many smiles and grimaces he expressed himself satisfied, and drove along even more briskly than before In five or ten minutes we

came to a sudden turn in the road, which here was very narrow, with high banks on each side. A bright gleam from among the trees caught my eye. I looked up to the top of the bank. There, half-hidden, were—one, two, three, four, —certainly five men armed with rifles. It was the sunlight on one of the barrels which had caught my attention. I looked to the other side—there were as many more." And here Uncle Harry made a dead pause, and looked round him.

"Don't—don't stop there! Please do go on!" cried Madge, in an agony. "It's dreadfully interesting."

"Well, knowing the state of our revolvers, Archer and I both gave ourselves up for lost, when, to my great amazement, I distinctly saw our coachman lift his hand and make some sort of signal to the men on our right. Not one of them stirred. We drove on as fast as before, and reached our destination safely; nor did we see or hear anything more of brigands that day. A fortnight later, a gentleman who travelled the same road, unarmed, was seized, and his friends were forced to pay £1,000 as a ransom before he was released."

"Was your coachman really, truly a brigand?" cried Fred. "Do you think he really was one?"

"I can hardly tell. I must say I think he had something to do with them. From what I have heard since, I think he expected his friends to have had some outpost or sentinel waiting about the place where we first observed him looking about, and that he would have given him the information about our being armed; and then we should have seen nothing of the whole body—whom I believe we did see."

"What a jolly sell for the brigands!" exclaimed Dick. "If they had only known your revolvers were empty, they might have got two thousand pounds more."

"And you no story?"

"Oh, a better one—a much better one, Uncle Harry! All about the inside of a brigand's den!"

"Indeed, I don't agree with you at all," said Uncle Harry, laughing. "But now we must start for the village," so he and the elder ones set off, the three younger ones watching them wistfully from the garden gate.

The tea bell was ringing loudly when they got back, and Uncle Harry said he would be glad to have some tea with them, though he and the elder girls, and, for this occasion only, Fred also, were going to dine late. Mrs. Willis had availed herself of the afternoon's leisure to go out on some business, and would not be back till dinner-time, so Mademoiselle was presiding.

Everybody appeared punctually but Dick and Dolly, but no one waited for them, After a few minutes Dick appeared, and half-muttered something that was by courtesy supposed to be an apology in French for being late, but which sounded rather odd.

"*Mais où donc est*, Miss Dolly?" inquired Mademoiselle.

"*Je ne sais pas*," responded Dick. "Isn't she come in?"

"*Non; mais il faut parler Français*, Dick," said Mademoiselle, reprovingly.

Tea went on, Uncle Harry talking French like all the rest. Soon it was nearly finished, and still Dolly did not appear.

"*Mais est-ce que personne n'a vu* Dolly *cette après-midi?*" demanded Mademoiselle at

last; but no one seemed to know anything about her.

"I'll run up and ask Nurse if she has been in to be made tidy," said Madge; but she returned to say that Nurse had not seen Dolly since just after dinner.

It began to get mysterious.

"Dick *et* Robin *dites-moi*," began Mademoiselle seriously, "*où avez-vous été cette après-midi, qu'avez-vous fait?*"

"*J'ai lu le* little Duke," said Robin.

"*Et vous*, Dick?"

"*J'ai shyé des*—stones."

Poor Mademoiselle gave a sigh of despair. Uncle Harry tried hard to conceal a smile in his teacup.

"*Mais où douc?*" asked Mademoiselle.

"*Dans le—le—pond*—bother! What's the stupid word?—*l'étang*."

"*Et* Dolly," cried Mademoiselle, springing to her feet with a look of despair. "*Elle est douc noyée!*"

"No, no, no! She's not been there all the afternoon," explained Dick; and Uncle Harry rose, saying cheerfully—

"I will go out and look for her at once,

Mademoiselle; I am sure we shall find her in a few minutes. I see it is beginning to rain a little, and that will drive her in, wherever she may have hidden herself."

But though Uncle Harry and Fred and Dick looked everywhere, they could not find her. It was getting dusk, too, as well as raining; and though Uncle Harry would not say so, he began to feel a little annoyed and uncomfortable about the child.

"Do you think," said Robin in an awe-struck voice, creeping close to Madge, as Uncle Harry and the boys went out again, this time taking Rogers with them, "do you think that brigands have got her?"

"No! Nonsense, dear! There are no brigands in England."

"But there might be, and we might not know. The other day on the common with Nurse I saw a horrid man just like a brigand, and he hid behind a bush. I think he has taken Dolly."

"And I'm sure he hasn't," said Madge stoutly; though, indeed, it was very odd and uncomfortable.

Outside, the search still continued, when suddenly a happy thought struck Dick.

"I do believe," he said suddenly, "that she is in Elysium!"

"What!" exclaimed Uncle Harry, seizing him by the shoulder. "What on earth do you mean, Dick?" But before he could explain to his horrified uncle the housemaid came running out.

"If you please, sir," she said, "Cook says as there's the oddest noise that ever she heard coming down the kitchen chimney, and would you please to come and——"

"Then she is there! She is in Elysium!" cried Fred and Dick together, and both darted off to the yard, followed by Uncle Harry, Rogers, and William.

Both boys were hastily beginning to mount by the dog kennel to the wall, calling out at the tops of their voices, "Don't be frightened, Dolly dear—we are coming," when Uncle Harry seized both by the shoulders, saying almost sternly,

"Where *are* you going, boys? Tell me at once where you think your sister is!"

"Why, she is on the roof," said both together.

"Let me go, Uncle Harry," added Dick

indignantly. "Let me go! There! Don't you hear her calling? Yes, Dolly dear, I'm coming."

Sure enough a faint voice from somewhere could be heard saying, "Oh, do come; do come soon!"

"On the roof?" said Uncle Harry, in a tone that expressed a good deal, but manfully suppressing his feelings, for the moment at any rate, he added, "I must let one of you go with me, I suppose, to show me the way. Here, Fred, you get up."

"Me, too," said Dick. "I often—often go. And Dolly wants me."

"No;" and that tone could not be trifled with, "I don't want two of you up there in dangerous places in this half-light. Have you a rope handy, Rogers, in case we want it?"

"Yes, sir." Rogers always had everything handy that could possibly be wanted.

"Now then, Fred!" And Fred led the way, Uncle Harry following him close. Nothing was said till they reached the bit of broken wall; then, as Uncle Harry watched his nephew scrambling up it, he said, "And may

I inquire how long you have been in the habit of getting up here in this fashion?"

"Oh, for ages!" said Fred, cheerfully. "Ever so long."

"Nicely looked after you must be," Uncle Harry thought to himself, not knowing that "ages" with Fred usually meant about three weeks, and "ever so long" might be only ten days.

A few steps more brought them to the deep place between the two roofs, and there sure enough was Dolly, lying full length at the bottom. She stretched one hand up towards them crying, "Oh, Fred, Fred! I thought nobody would ever come. Is that Uncle Harry?"

Poor Dolly! She certainly did not look as if she were in Elysium! She was wedged into the bottom of the space and unable to move, her face was scratched and begrimed with dirt, and she was almost wet through. Her uncle wasted no time in inquiring how she got there; but, lying on the edge of the roof, he managed, though with some difficulty, to raise her to her feet. That done, there still remained the task of getting her down—not so easy to manage, with her limbs all stiffened and sore

as they were. However, Uncle Harry sent Fred down to fetch up Rogers, who stood by the piece of broken wall and received Dolly into his arms when Uncle Harry lowered her, and from there all the rest was comparatively easy. Once down, she was promptly handed over to Nurse (who, with almost every other person belonging to the house, was out in the yard to see them come down) to be washed and put to bed, and have tea afterwards.

"Don't ask her any questions to-night," said Uncle Harry, looking at the little girl's tearful face. "Let her get to bed as fast as possible."

But he kept Fred and Dick, and asked them a few questions.

When he had found out that Fred had taken the other two up, that no one else knew about it, that they had been up about a dozen times, but that Dolly had never been by herself before, that they thought it a jolly place, and "didn't see why they shouldn't go there," he let them go, and turning to Rogers who stood by listening, said with a shrug of his shoulders, "Well, Rogers?"

To which Rogers only replied solemnly, "Well, sir—I never did!"

CHAPTER IX.

A PROMISE.

When Mrs. Willis returned in the evening, perhaps she felt it a little hard that she could not leave the children even for half a day—and that under the care of their uncle—without their getting into some mischief, but she asked no questions of any one concerned till the morning. Then, however, she inquired into the matter rather strictly, and blame was pretty fairly dealt out all round. Leslie was the only one who altogether escaped, for Mrs. Willis had not understood that Fred was specially under her care the first time he managed to make the ascent,—and Leslie said nothing about it,—while Madge was generally so much with the little ones that it had come to be thought, and even expected, that she would look after them. Perhaps this was a little unjust ; but Madge was too much horrified at Uncle Harry's

description of the risk the little boys and Dolly had run to think so.

What startled her most was not what he said about the dangers of falling off, but that he positively declared that if they had not found her soon, Dolly must have been drowned. It sounded too horrible to be true. They could not believe it; but when Uncle Harry drew a little sketch of the place, and showed her that the water running off the roofs must have collected there, and, being unable to run off as usual because its passage was so completely stopped, would very quickly have risen to cover her face, they ceased arguing the matter, and turned away with rather awe-struck looks.

Dolly was not punished, as Mrs. Willis thought she had suffered enough pain and discomfort, besides having to stay in bed great part of Sunday, but Fred and Dick were forbidden to go off the gravel paths, when they played in the garden, for a whole week.

"It just stopped all their play—every bit!" Fred grumbled, hoping Uncle Harry would hear, and perhaps beg them off, but if Uncle Harry heard, he never said a word.

He was very sorry, though, that they should have got into such a scrape during the short time he could spend with them, and so have spoilt both their own pleasure and his ; but he was uncommonly thankful that their pranks had been found out, and such a very dangerous amusement ended.

Dolly's account of the matter was that when Uncle Harry said it was going to rain she remembered that she had left her nicest set of dibs upon the roof in a very unsafe place,—I suppose everybody knows what "dibs" are,—and she was afraid that if it rained they might get washed into the gutter and lost. Such a misfortune could not be contemplated for a moment. She never had been up without the boys ; but Fred was out, and Dick not to be found ; so all alone she accomplished the climb, found her dear dibs, had a good game with them in a snug corner, and then was making her way down when her foot slipped, and she rolled into "the deep place," getting so tightly wedged in with one arm under her that she could not stir.

"And did you not call for help? Did no one hear?" asked Uncle Harry.

"I didn't call—at least, not for a long time."

"Pray why not?"

"Because—because I kept hoping Fred or Dick would come up. Fred made us promise not to tell; and I thought if I called, and some grown-up person came, it would be as bad as telling."

"Oh, ho! That was the way of it, was it?" said Uncle Harry a little absently, stroking the little girl's wavy hair as she leant against his knee.

"It was plucky of her, wasn't it, Uncle Harry?" said Fred approvingly.

"Rather," said Uncle Harry, smiling; "though perhaps her pluck might have been shown in a better cause. Let us forget about it now, however. I have got something to propose to you all."

This was on Sunday afternoon and all the children were in the drawing-room with their uncle—even Frances and Daisy. Madge was playing with them and Robin on the floor.

"What, *all*, Uncle Harry—Daisy and Frances, too?" cried Dick.

"Well, no; I think not Daisy and Frances; I am afraid I could not undertake them; but

all the rest. I want you to come and stay with me in London for a week in your next holidays."

There was a little gasp of delight from almost everyone; but Uncle Harry went on—

"I can't have you for Christmas. I am afraid you will have to spend your Christmas down here; but after Christmas you must come, and I will see that you have some fun."

Such a flood of exclamations broke out here, that if Uncle Harry had anything more to say he had no chance of saying it.

"Oh, lovely!"

"Oh, may we go to the theatre?"

"Oh—and the National Gallery?" This was Leslie.

"Bosh! Who cares for pictures? Now a conjuror—I've never seen a conjuror."

"Or a pantomime. Dick and me haven't ever seen a pantomime."

"Shall we see the Queen, do you think?"

The last speaker was Robin; but before Uncle Harry could answer anybody it all began again.

"Oh, please say we shall go to a theatre!"

"Oh, I do hope there'll be skating then!"

"What shall you take us to, Uncle Harry?"

"Don't let's ask too much; let it be a s'prise—only I do want so much to see the Queen."

"And the boys will be there, too! Oh, it is too nice!"

"And no governesses or holiday lessons! If it wasn't for you, Uncle Harry, we should have had lessons all the holidays."

"Well, I can promise that you shall have plenty of fun, and I will take you all to something that you wish to see. Perhaps the elder ones may like one thing and the little ones something else."

"Yes; of course that would be much nicer than going all in a body," said Leslie.

"But I don't know what you will do all day in a London house if you have no lessons at all. You know I must be out in the morning, and many days part of the afternoon—even in the Christmas holidays. However," as he saw that some faces fell, "we can talk about that another day. Any way, we will manage to have a jolly time together."

"Oh yes; thank you so awfully much, Uncle Harry."

"Have you told the boys?" asked Madge.

"Not yet. I am going to see them at school next week, and I will tell them then."

Madge gave a little leap of delight at the thought; but Daisy and Frances, finding something pleasant was being talked about, began crying, "Me too, Uncle Harry—me too!" and she turned to pacify them with promises of "something from London," that sounded very delightful.

Robin saw she was too busy to attend to him just then, and he could not wait; so he took hold of Leslie's sleeve to draw her attention.

"Leslie," he whispered, "do tell me—shall we be in London when the Queen goes to undo the big door—in parliament, I mean?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you are talking about, Robin—don't bother just now. I want to ask Uncle Harry something," was the impatient answer; and the little boy turned away, still with the puzzled idea about the opening of parliament that had got into his head on the night of the acting.

And now, even when Uncle Harry had gone, there was something pleasant to be anticipated—something to be constantly talked about, and

something to write to mother about. Mr. Hilton had told all the children that they must not write about anything that would worry their mother, so of course nothing could be said about Dolly's adventure. They had heard several times from both their father and mother before this, and they had written several times to different places—Malta, Port Said, and Aden—where the letters would meet them; but to tell the truth, some among the smaller ones found letter-writing a good deal of trouble. They were all very eager to write, but the many little letters were very apt to begin in largish hand, "*My dearest Mother, I hope you are better,*" and then would follow, "We are all quite well." And then some piece of news such as, "Yesterday the pony went to be shod," or, "I had such a jolly ride to-day," and then, behold! all that the young writer had to say seemed to come to an end, and the letter would finish up, "I have no more to say, so good-bye;" or else, "I am in a great hurry; so no more to-day. From your loving child." Dick distinguished himself most of all in the letter-writing way; for once, when he had begun his letter, his small brains seemed quite

empty of anything to tell mother; and he wrote—

"My Dearest Mother,—
"We had roste duck for dinner to-day.
"Your loving son,
"Dick."

The others laughed at him; but nothing abashed, Dick sent his letter. He said he was sure mother would like to know.

And so she did. What least little tiny detail that reached her in those odd wee letters did she not care to know? She did not mind the ruled lines, or the crooked ones, or the odd spelling, or the little scraps of news that sounded so funny to other people; they were all dear and welcome to the loving mother's heart that read between the lines all that the children would have written if they could, and felt all the love that was in their hearts, though it could not easily find expression in words.

There was plenty to write about now, however, and it would have been rather funny to count how often the question, "Won't it be jolly?" occurred in the next two batches of letters that reached Mr. and Mrs. Hilton.

Things might have gone on more smoothly

in the schoolroom, too, but unluckily poor Mademoiselle had managed to make herself very unpopular with the children. Fred and Dick chose to fancy that it was because Mademoiselle had "made such a fuss," that Mrs. Willis had been "in such a rise and so down on them about getting on the roof;" that, in short, it was her fault, and not theirs, that they were punished. (You must please excuse Fred and Dick's ways of putting things. I use them, and suppose that other children will understand them.) Mademoiselle was not always very wise, and she constantly held it as a threat over them that if they did not do this, that, or the other, or if they did something else that was disapproved of, they would not be allowed to go to their Uncle's.

This was irritating to the children, "When it's the only bit of pleasure we are likely to have till father and mother come back! It's too bad," they grumbled.

"Only a Frenchwoman would be so nasty!" Fred added; and from that time most of the children thought it right and fitting not only to dislike poor Mademoiselle, who, after all, had not done them much harm, but to hate all French people and French things as well.

Out of this arose one of the most violent quarrels that had ever been known in the Eston Grange schoolroom; and a very pretty quarrel it was—all about nothing, to begin with, and yet spreading in the end till nearly the whole household was drawn into it on one side or the other.

It began thus. One rainy afternoon, Madge, hearing a good deal of noise, went into the playroom after lesson time, and found Fred and Dick and Dolly all talking at once at the tops of their voices, with flaming cheeks; while Robin, with equally red cheeks, was sitting cross-legged on the table with his lips pressed close together as if he never meant to open them again.

"What's the matter?" inquired Madge. "You are making such a noise!"

"Oh, Madge," cried the three talkers, all turning to her at once with great indignation, "just think, Robin says he wouldn't care if he wasn't an Englishman!"

"And I don't care," said Robin doggedly, shutting his mouth up as tightly as before.

"There!" exclaimed all the others excitedly. "Isn't it horrid of him, Madge?"

"I don't quite understand," said Madge, who was never very willing to go against Robin.

"Why it's this," began Dora. "You know Daisy's kitten is dead that she was always cuddling."

"Yes," said Madge, who might well know, as she and Nurse had spent ever so long only yesterday trying to comfort both Daisy and Frances in their great grief for the loss of this dear kitten.

"Well, and last night Mademoiselle said she would get her another little kittie, and she said it would be a French kittie, and that Daisy must call it 'Minette' and not 'Pussy.' And Daisy told Robin and me this morning, and——"

"Yes," broke in Dick and Fred, "and they told us, and we don't want her to have it."

"But why?" inquired Madge.

"Oh; a kitten that one had to speak French to!" cried Dolly in most expressive tones.

"A kitten that wouldn't understand 'Puss' but only 'Minette.' How horrid!"

"And Robin thinks it doesn't matter!" said Fred, with the deepest scorn.

"And then, when we said everything English

was nicer than French things, he said it wasn't; and that he wouldn't have minded if he had been a Frenchman—that it wouldn't have been anything to be sorry about!"

"No more it would," said Robin. "If I'd been born French I shouldn't have wanted to be anything different. I daresay they are just as nice—every bit."

"There!" said Dick, "it's so—so—what did you say it was of him, Fred?"

"Disloyal," said Fred, with the air of one to whom the longest words are no difficulty whatever.

"Yes, it's so disloyal of him, 'specially when we had all agreed to hate the French, because of Mademoiselle being so nasty!"

"I didn't agwee," said Robin. "*I* think it is silly. And as for English things being nicer than French ones, they aren't. French chocolate is nicer than English—ever so much."

Dick was rather silenced by this, for he was very fond of good things to eat, and knew it was true.

"But then," he said, a happy thought striking him, "you get so much more of the English for your money, that it makes up."

Madge felt rather puzzled what to say to all this. "I don't see why you are so angry with Robin;" she began; "I don't think he means any harm."

"You always take his part. *I* think it's very sneaky of him, but I don't care. I know *I* sha'n't speak to any one who likes stupid Frenchmen better than Englishmen," said Fred loftily.

"No more sha'n't I."

"No more sha'n't I," echoed Dick and Dolly, with an over-abundant supply of negatives as well as of indignation.

"And I know," added Dolly, "that Leslie thinks Mademoiselle is horrid, and she's older than you, Madge, and knows better. She thinks she's mean and spiteful."

"All Frenchies are mean and spiteful," observed Dick calmly. "Robin 'll be just like a Frenchman when he grows up. His nose has got a French shape."

Poor Robin bore up against all this scorn as well as he could, but the corners of his mouth quivered a little, showing tears were not very far away. Madge felt very angry.

"I don't believe Leslie ever said any such thing. You are talking nonsense," she said.

"Yes she did—she did."

"When?"

But that was not quite so easy to answer. No one exactly recollected when or where Leslie had made such a statement. It was more a vague impression that the children had gathered from her manner, than any words she had actually used.

"Come away with me, Robin," said Madge, taking advantage of their silence. "We'll go upstairs."

"But Leslie is on our side," cried Fred, as they left the room, and Madge tried not to hear him. She comforted Robin when she got him safely in her own room as well as she could, but he was greatly oppressed with the idea of not being spoken to by the others, though quite determined not to give up his opinion.

"I couldn't say I finked so when I didn't, Madgie," he said with a deep sigh; "I fink it's velly likely French children is just as nice as English." Robin always spoke badly when he was at all disturbed in mind.

Meanwhile, the others had sought out Leslie, and found her in the little drawing-room, deep in a book. She started a little when they came

in, and half hid the book, but the children were too excited to notice what she did, and poured out upon her a wild story of Robin's misdeeds, ending with a demand to know whether she did not think Mademoiselle was very tiresome and disagreeable.

Leslie was too anxious lest any of the children should notice a certain gap in a shelf above her head, or observe the colour of the book half covered with her dress, to pay much attention to their story. She gave a hasty answer that perhaps they ought not to say so, but that no doubt Mademoiselle was not very nice, but it couldn't be helped she supposed—she would have as little to do with her as she possibly could, and she wished they would go away.

She little knew the harm she did by that hasty ill-considered answer. From that moment, in the minds of all the younger children, the schoolroom was divided into two parties; Madge and Robin taking Mademoiselle's side, Leslie and the others against her.

Nor did the mischief stop here. At first Nurse was very angry when she found Fred and Dick and Dolly what she called "spiting"

Robin, and therefore sided with Madge and Robin; but inasmuch as she never could bear that any one but herself should scold the children, always thought the governesses overworked them, and herself had no great love for Mademoiselle, "never fancying," as she said, "any one as couldn't understand plain English," she soon went over in a fashion to the other side. She carried the story, such as it was, downstairs, where hardly any one but Rogers had sense to think or say that Robin was quite right; and the argument about French and English raged quite as hotly among the servants as among the children, the only result being that every one was rather cross and rather uncomfortable, though each and all would have been puzzled to say how it began or what it was all about. There was a spirit of opposition to the governesses among both servants and children, that was likely to do them all harm.

But what had Leslie been doing? Why had she cared to hide that red-covered book from the children, who so little noticed what she did? Ah! things were not going on well with Leslie; a little beginning of evil was leading on to

worse. It had begun with but a little discontent and murmuring against the authority set over her, but daily and hourly indulged, it had come to this, that she was now actually and knowingly disobeying one of her mother's strictest commands; nay more, she had tampered with her conscience so long by little sins against authority, little triflings with orders or directions given her, because she did not like to acknowledge that authority—little sins against truth, because it was "only Mrs. Willis" and did not matter, that now she scarcely recognized the fact, hardly realized at all that she was doing very wrong.

Those red books on the shelf in the little drawing-room were forbidden to all the children. There were plenty of books in the room that they might read, plenty of shelves that they might ransack from end to end if they chose, but all alike knew that that shelf of red books, and one or two above it, were not to be touched.

How had she begun to read them? She hardly knew, except that one dull holiday afternoon she had found herself alone in the little drawing-room in a yawning mood, oppressed

with a sense of having nothing to do and nothing in which to interest herself. The children were tiresome, and Madge *would* play with them, which was so stupid of her. With a sort of feeling that really when everything was so annoying it did not matter what she did, she took out a volume from the shelf and opened it. The first few pages did not please her much, there was too much description; but soon there was a good deal about two children, Tom and Maggie, their father and mother, their uncles and aunts—and oh, how droll those uncles and aunts were! She became more and more interested, and read on and on, hardly needing to quiet her conscience by saying to herself, that of course her mother would not mind her reading about children. When startled by the tea bell, with flushed cheeks she slipped the book back into its place—it was called "The Mill on the Floss." She was so absorbed in the story, and in wondering how to get time to finish it, that she scarcely spoke all the evening, and prepared her lessons very heedlessly.

Unhappily, she had found time enough to finish it before this; and then in the blank she

felt after that excitement was over, she had even begun another, called "Jane Eyre." This was in the beginning even more absorbing than the first; but she cared less for it as it went on. Still she felt she must see the end, but she was determined not to read another.

She did not know what she was doing. I do not mean as a matter of right and wrong,—that she knew well enough,—but she did not understand that she was spoiling for herself one of the keenest, one of the best and brightest pleasures that ought to have belonged to her in after life. Children do not believe this. But if we will gather fruit before it is ripe, we cannot expect it to have the sweetness, the rich, delicious flavour that it would have had if we waited; and worse than that, we may come to believe that there is no fruit riper or better than our poor sour green stuff. Delightful books are a sort of mental fruit; and plenty of them are not ripe for us while we are children, that yet will be the most delicious food for our minds later on; only if we will try and taste them before the fit time, we may chance to spoil for ourselves for ever the great pleasure we might have had out of them. Depend upon it,

this is one reason, among others, why wise parents do keep back certain books from their children—not only that the books may harm those who are too young for them, by taking their minds off the natural interests and occupations of their age, but also, as I say, if read too soon may destroy for them what ought to be a delight in after life.

Meanwhile, the days were slipping on from autumn to winter, and getting visibly shorter and darker. Madge's register of the number of days to the Christmas holidays, and the happy day that would bring the boys home, was, to her great delight, getting very short too. She had never wished for Gerald so much as this time; surely when he was at home there would be a difference—things could not go on so badly.

CHAPTER X.

MISFORTUNE.

THE longed-for day came at last, as days will, however impatiently we wait for them. It was the 20th of December. The mark books and registers for the half-year were all filled up, closed, and put away. Mrs. Willis announced to the children that, till January the 18th, only a certain amount of holiday lessons would be required of them; and she set certain tasks to be done by themselves, besides some work to be done with herself or Mademoiselle. The children thought the holiday tasks were easier than usual, but before they had time to rejoice much at this, Mrs. Willis damped the joy of the younger ones completely, by mentioning that she expected them to speak French at all times, except when actually playing. Further, she added that after one o'clock that day no work

would be done; and that she should be busy all the afternoon making up the half-yearly reports of their conduct to send to New Zealand by the next mail.

Some people had forgotten those half-yearly reports, and felt a little anxious as to what might be said in them; but others, and Madge was among them, had very light hearts about the matter. She had a very happy afternoon, seeing that the boys' bedroom was all exactly as they liked it, and arranging their various treasures belonging to them, which were always left in her charge.

At four o'clock a cab drew up at the door, laden with the well-known boxes, and Madge flew down to the Hall where Dick and Dolly, Fred and Robin were already executing a dance of delight with a chorus, "The boys are come! the boys are come!"

Jack sprang hastily from the cab, and was in the midst of them directly. Gerald followed more slowly, and even before Madge had hugged him more than once, before Rogers had finished paying the man, or Leslie had come out of the little drawing-room, she felt sure that something was the matter.

"Why, Gerald, how queer you look!" she said anxiously.

"Do I?" said Gerald, somewhat wearily, dropping into the nearest chair, and beginning to cough.

"Of course he does," said Jack. "He's been and got the most awful cold. I know I never got a wink of sleep last night with his coughing, and I don't suppose he did either. You'd look done up if you'd been awake the whole night."

Jack, however, did not look any the worse for his broken rest, and was soon talking vociferously of all he had done, was doing, and was going to do, particularly while in London with Uncle Harry; while Mrs. Willis, who had come into the hall in time to hear his words about the cough, was anxiously questioning Gerald about his cold.

He hated talking about himself, however, and, after answering as briefly as politeness would allow, soon got up, and said he felt better and would go upstairs, where Madge accompanied him; while Jack stayed with the others.

Once upstairs, however, he did not disdain

to fling himself full length on the bed, and admit that he had a headache. Madge climbed on the bed, too, took his head on her knee, and began stroking it in a very comfortable, soothing way while they talked.

"Have you been grinding awfully hard?" was Madge's first question, as she looked down at his white face.

"Not so very hard. I couldn't the last few days; but till then, pretty well."

"And oh, Gerald, how many prizes?"

"Two—Greek grammar and Latin prose. I ought to have had one for German, too, but I didn't sap enough."

"Oh, but that's good! And has Jack got any?"

"One—mathematics."

"That's nice; it will please father!"

"Yes, I suppose so. Your fingers are nice," as gentle and cool they strayed over his hot temples.

A pause. Then Madge asked, "What made you so bad, Gerald?"

"Don't know. I do feel worse than just a cold. I say, Madge, suppose I shouldn't be able to go to uncle Harry's after all?"

"Oh, Gerald! But if you couldn't, I wouldn't."

"Nonsense! As if I would let you stay, and lose the fun. How have you been getting on with everybody?"

"Oh, just middling. I can't say just what I think about it, but it's like this: Mrs. Willis doesn't understand Leslie——"

A snort from Gerald. "That's what Leslie says, I suppose!"

"No, *really*, she doesn't, Gerald. Leslie does say it; but I think so, too."

"Well, go on."

"Then Leslie doesn't understand Mrs. Willis, and thinks she is unjust; and she says hard things of her and Mademoiselle, and the little ones hear her; and *they* don't understand, and they think she means more than she really does, and it makes them tiresome to Mademoiselle, and so they go on—everybody misunderstanding just a little bit. I do so often wish I could give everything just a little pull, and set it all straight—just as Rogers does a tablecloth, don't you know."

Gerald laughed at this, but the laughing brought on a fit of coughing that frightened

Madge ; it lasted so long, and sounded so bad. In the midst of it Rogers and William came in with the boxes, and Rogers stood and watched Gerald till the fit was over, and he lay back tired out.

"It's my belief, Mr. Gerald," he said solemnly, "that you've been and got the whooping cough."

"I'm sure I hope not," said Gerald wearily, while in the same breath Madge cried, "Oh, Rogers, don't tell Mrs. Willis! She will be in such a state."

"That's nonsense, Miss Margaret. Of course I shall do my duty. I think Mr. Gerald ought to see a doctor," he said severely, and departed, leaving the boy and girl looking at each other in a sort of despair. Rogers was such a very important person that it never occurred to either of them that he might be wrong.

"Oh, Gerald! What shall we do?" said Madge with a gasp.

"Never mind that old croak, Madgie. If he's right, it can't be helped; but I want you to get out my prizes now," so Madge jumped off the bed, and, after some rummaging, found

three books bound in crimson leather and lettered in gold.

"How jolly they look! These are the best you have ever had."

"Yes," said Gerald, fingering the edges, "they are rather extra. You see——"

"What?" as he stopped.

"I've been head of the school these last two months."

"What!—above Harper and Forest? Oh!" as the boy nodded assent, "why did you not tell me?"

"I was afraid I might lose it again. Harper and Forest are both a good bit older. I only took it at the October monthly exam., and I can tell you I've had hard work to keep it these last two."

"Oh, I am glad! it's splendid!" and their happy talk was prolonged till tea-time, when they went down together, Gerald feeling considerably better, and more inclined to think Rogers a "croak."

Nevertheless, the cough came back at night, and Jack, too, was heard to cough once or twice; so next day the doctor was sent for and saw them both.

Alas! Rogers was right. Dr. Bell's verdict was, "Whooping cough to be sure, and no mistake about it." Then, when Mrs. Willis inquired if it had reached the infectious stage yet, he answered, "That it has. I suppose all the children were kissing these boys when they got back yesterday? Ah! I thought so. Well, you may make up your mind to it, then; they'll all have it. Good morning. I'll look in again to-morrow."

So here was a cheerful state of things for the holidays! No going to London, no skating, sliding, or snowballing; no going out of doors at all, at present. "Keep them all in the house for a fortnight at least," the doctor had said—it was an awful prospect. Things had seemed bad enough without this additional trouble; it was too trying. For two whole days everybody was in blank despair, such gloomy faces had never before been seen at Eston Grange.

Perhaps poor Mrs. Willis's heart sank lowest of all at the doctor's announcement. She knew at once that the little holiday she had been hoping to spend with her own son and daughter, while the children were with their uncle, must be given up, and the poor lady felt that she

sorely needed a little rest after all her work and anxiety. It was with a very deep sigh that she opened her writing-case, in order to write and let Mr. Henry Hilton know the state of matters.

Mr. Henry Hilton was certainly a satisfactory uncle. He gave a long whistle as he read the letter. "Poor children," he said to himself, "they are certainly having rather hard lines just now," and then, thrusting the letter into his pocket, he finished his breakfast, meditating the while what he could do for them. He considered the subject all day, and the result was, that instead of putting a note to Mrs. Willis in the letter box, he put himself into the first afternoon train to Eston the next day, and arrived there about three o'clock.

You may imagine that they were glad to see him! No one had yet begun to cheer up at all. Madge and Fred had already got coughs; Nurse and Mrs. Willis had had a difference of opinion as to whether it were possible to keep Daisy and Frances out of the way of infection; Leslie was too much disgusted with things in general to speak to any one; Dick and Dolly were still not friends with Robin; Jack, having

"bothered" the doctor, the cough, and Gerald for catching it, to his heart's content, was nowhere to be found; while poor Gerald was in the lowest possible spirits, having just had a visit from his doctor, who had said, meaning to be cheerful, "Why, whooping cough is nothing. It'll just give you an extra holiday-time, and all boys like that!"

"Extra holiday?" asked Gerald aghast. "Do you mean to say I sha'n't be fit for school on the 18th of January."

"Why, no. I'm afraid I can't give you a clean bill of health under six weeks. Why, what's the matter, my boy?" seeing in Gerald's face that something was wrong.

"Nothing," said Gerald, "only——"

"Only what?"

"I was going to Eton next term."

"That all? Tut—never mind. You'll go in the middle of term; that's the only difference."

But though Gerald would not say any more to the doctor, Madge knew what a bitter pill this was to him. He let out his feelings to her, and indeed, his heart had been so long set on going to Eton, that a delay even of a few weeks seemed hard to bear.

"It's awfully hard luck," he said, "I do think it is. I've counted on it so long now"—and Madge's attempts at consolation were useless for a while.

Altogether, the horizon was gloomy, and the sky full of clouds, when Uncle Harry alighted at the door; but the sight of his cheery face was like the first gleam of sunshine, the sound of his voice was the second, and before he had been five minutes in the house, the clouds began to melt and disperse a little.

He talked a few moments to Mrs. Willis, managed to cheer her with a promise of a fortnight's complete holiday when the children should have recovered, and then he swept the entire family, including Jack, who had now turned up, into the drawing-room, "to keep him company," he said.

"Well, I suppose you all think this is a very bad look out?" he said, when they were as nearly settled as some people's fidgety natures would allow.

"It's beastly—horrid!"

"It's a shame!"

"Awfully hard lines!"

"Gerald was an awful muff to go and get it!"

"Don't you think it's rather hard, Uncle Harry?" This last was Madge's question.

"Well, I do think it is rather a piece of ill-luck for everybody concerned, Madge, — for Mrs. Willis and Nurse as much or more than for any one else,—but still I have heard of worse things happening, you know."

"Yes, of course," said Madge, "I know this isn't what you grown-up people call a great misfortune; it's not that at all; but still, don't you think that for us, who are not grown-up, and haven't grown-up people's things to make up for it, that it is rather a misfortune?"

"Yes, I think it is, Madge, and I think, too, that you draw quite a fair distinction between what would be a trouble to grown-up people, and what is a trouble to you. You remind me of a story I once read, of a little girl, who was crying because it had come on wet and she was prevented from going with her father and mother to a picnic. Her father said to her, cheerfully, 'Look at me, my dear; I am not crying.'

"'No more should I,' said the child, 'if I were as big as you.'"

"What a nasty father!" said Dolly, seriously; while all the other children laughed.

Only Leslie turned away, saying, "I don't think it matters what you call it or don't call it. It is a misfortune, and there's an end of it."

"To be sure. We are all agreed about that, but still, Leslie, there is such a thing as making the best of it!"

Leslie shrugged her shoulders and did not answer; but Gerald, who was lying back in a big armchair, lifted his head languidly, and said, "I can't see it—about not going to Eton the beginning of term."

"Yes, even of that there's a better and a worse to be made somehow or other."

"You know we sha'n't be able to come and stay with you in the holidays?"

"Yes, I know that; but as soon as ever the doctor will give leave, I will have you all for a fortnight."

That was good to hear. A gratified murmur broke from the assembly.

"It will serve to disinfect you all," continued Uncle Harry; "and meanwhile, suppose I were to offer a prize for an essay on 'Making the best of it'?"

Some laughed, some groaned. Madge cried, "Oh do!" Leslie said nothing, and took up a book.

"Put it to the vote," said Uncle Harry. "Whoever is in favour of the just-mentioned proposal be pleased to hold up the right hand."

Five hands went up—Gerald, Madge, Robin, Dick, and Dolly.

"And whoever is against it, please to hold up the right hand."

Four hands went up.

"The 'ayes' have it," said Uncle Harry; "five to four. But how comes this? Someone must have voted twice."

"I didn't vote at all," said Leslie, looking up; and then it appeared that Dick and Dolly had both voted each way.

"I thought it would make more!" Dick said, when the others laughed at him; but it was quite clear that the "ayes" had it.

"What will the prize be?" inquired Robin, who had settled himself on Madge's knee.

"Ah! that I can't say yet. It depends on who gets it—but something satisfactory."

"Nobody need try who doesn't wish, need they?"

"No, certainly not; but anybody may try who likes."

"I shall try," said Robin confidently; and even those who voted against the idea were secretly coming to the same conclusion.

Uncle Harry, however, said no more about the matter; but proposed to tell them a story—an old story, but a true one and new to them; and forthwith began.

It was in the year 1773 that a Scottish gentleman named Mackenzie determined to leave Scotland for ever with his wife, his two daughters, and his son, and seek a new home in America. It was but about ten years before this, that the French had been defeated in their attempt to extend their dominion in Canada. Under their general Montcalm they had endeavoured to get possession of the great chain of lakes, and so prevent the British colonies extending to the westward; but after several years of fighting, at first with varying success, General Amherst broke through the line of forts along the lakes; and at the same time, General Wolfe brought an army up the St. Lawrence, to lay siege to Quebec. You know the story of his victory and death.

'They run. I protest they run!' cried an officer who supported the dying man shot through the breast. 'Who run?' he asked, calling all his failing powers together. 'The French!' 'Then I die happy,' he said—and so died. The conquest of Canada was completed; and the American colonies were freed for ever from fear of French aggression, and prospered all the more. I only mention this, because just at the time at which Mr. Mackenzie thought of settling in America, the colonies had made, as it were, a fresh start. Canada as well as the other colonies lay open to the British; men of enterprize and energy were wanted, and had great opportunities before them; although more than a shadow of a quarrel had already arisen between the colonies and the mother country."

"Don't make it too like a history lesson," begged Fred, in a piteous voice.

"I won't," said Uncle Harry. "I need hardly trouble you with any more history. Mr. Mackenzie was a younger son of a good family but poor, and it was no wonder he was tempted to try if in those wonderful colonies he could not make a fortune for his children."

"How old were they?"

"The girls, Hester and Sophia, were sixteen and seventeen, the boy, Alexander, was fourteen. They took their passage in a sailing ship, the *Ocean Queen*, starting from Newport, Glasgow, having travelled down on horseback from their home in Dumbartonshire; Mrs. Mackenzie and her daughters riding on pillions behind Mr. Mackenzie, Alexander and a servant, and their baggage going by cart. It was summer weather, and they had a beautiful sail with a light and favourable wind down the Clyde,—one of the loveliest estuaries in the world,—and then they should have sailed away to the north-west, and so made for the Virginias. But, unhappily for them, a contrary wind sprung up and rose to a gale. They were driven northward, and thought themselves fortunate to make a harbour on one of the islands of the Hebrides. Here most of the passengers landed to rest and refresh themselves after the storm; and the captain refitted his vessel, and lay waiting for a favourable wind.

"Mrs. Mackenzie had friends on these islands, her own family having originally belonged to those parts, and they found themselves well

and hospitably entertained. There was a good deal of gaiety—in particular, dancing—more than Mrs. Mackenzie approved, for she was very strict about some of these things. The people on the islands were both more numerous and more prosperous than they are now ; and that season it was especially well with them, for it was long since they had been visited by pirates, of whom they were constantly in fear. The Mackenzies were shown how at all the churches the bell-ropes were outside the towers, so that any one observing pirates landing on the coast could ring the bell to call the neighbours far and near to assist him.

"'Paul Jones,' said their host, 'has not visited us these five years back. Some say he is dead, but for my part I believe it not. He will be down on our coast some summer night when we least expect it, and are off our guard, and we shall need the bells.'

"'I trust not, sir,' said Mrs. Mackenzie ; but the gentleman shook his head and made no further answer.

"When they had been about a fortnight on shore, and still there was no sign of a change of wind, it chanced that a gentleman on the

island was giving a large ball to all his neighbours and acquaintances, and the Miss Mackenzies were invited among the rest, but Mrs. Mackenzie refused the invitation for them. The young ladies, who had never been at a ball, were much disappointed—and even rather angry.

"The day of the entertainment came, and the elder said to the younger, 'Would it not be a fine prank to climb the hillside to the little church to-night and ring the bell, to bring them all out in a hurry to look for Paul Jones?'"

"What a splendid idea—what a lark!" cried several of the boys, while Dick rubbed his hands together in intense delight at the joke; but Uncle Harry went on—

"The sisters were wild, high-spirited girls, and the idea seemed to them too good to be given up. It was easy, late that evening, when they were supposed to be in bed, to slip out unseen and unsuspected, and make their way along the wild moorland road that led to a lonely little church some three miles away, though many girls would have been terrified before they had got a hundred yards

away from the house. It was a moonlight night when they started, and three-quarters of the heavens were cloudless, but over the fourth quarter, where the sun had set, lay some heavy motionless clouds. It was almost as light as day, and the moonlight made a lovely silvery track over the calm, gently-moving sea. They sped quickly on their road, full of laughter, and hardly stopping to glance round them till they reached the little church with its tiny belfry and the bell-rope hanging outside all ready for their purpose.

"At the churchyard gate, the younger sister hung back a little timidly, but the elder one laughed at her, and soon persuaded her out of her terrors. They entered together, and, seizing the bell-rope, rung a loud clanging alarm. Once—twice—thrice, it rang out, disturbing the quiet night; and then the merry mischief-makers stole softly away.

"They had intended to go straight back to the little town, but fearing to meet any one, they did not take the direct road, but a foot-path that should have brought them into the town on the other side.

"Already they could hear sounds, and

distinguish figures moving along the roads, as though mustering. From the direction of Skerry-Vreckan, where the ball was going on, shouts and cries came up to them in the clear air; lights could be seen flitting about, and a dark mass of people seemed to be assembling on the edge of the moor. From far off, twice the sound of a church bell reached them, carrying further and further the tale which their bell had begun. The two girls laughed till they were tired at the commotion they had caused. From the hill where they stood they could see quite down to the town; and it seemed so near, that they thought they would wait a little time to let the bustle subside, that they might slip in quietly, undetected; and finding near there a 'bield' or shelter built for the sheep on the hillside, they entered it to rest a little.

"The night had been warm. In their shelter they got drowsy, and did not notice a coming change, till Hester, starting from a little doze, exclaimed, 'Why, Sophy, it is quite dark!'

"Too true: the clouds had swept up over the sky, and a dull grey mist had gathered thick upon the hillside. It was the hour of

dawn, but they could not see two yards before them.

"In their alarm, they foolishly left the hut to try and make their way home; but, deceived by that treacherous mist, they wandered on and on, further and further away from the town. They walked for hours, yet never found the path they sought, or a landmark that they knew.

"At last the younger sunk down exhausted on the hillside, and the elder, wrapping her plaid round them both, said they would go no further, but wait there till the mist lifted. They sat huddled together, comforting each other; and at last, after many weary hours, the sun, now high in the sky, broke through the mist, and it melted away like a dream. Below them to the right lay the little town, with its harbour and bay rippling with a fresh breeze. A few fishing boats were dotted about spreading their brown sails that shone in the sun, but where was the *Ocean Queen?* Could that be she whose sails they could see on the horizon?

"With fearful hearts they hurried down—to find, alas! that their fears were too well founded.

The wind had changed in the night when the mist came up; the captain, who was in charge of important despatches as well as of a valuable cargo, had hurried all his passengers on board —their father, mother, and brother were all gone!"

"Oh, Uncle Harry, how dreadful! What did they do?"

"How could their father and mother leave them?"

"A pilot who had accompanied the ship so far, brought back word that it had been supposed the girls were on board; in the confusion of the hurried start, one thinking they were with one person and one with another, and when their absence was discovered, the captain refused to put back. The pilot brought a letter of instructions from Mr. Mackenzie directing them to return to Glasgow, and take a ship there—but it took six months often in those days to make the voyage to the Virginias. Before they could get a ship, the American War of Independence broke out, and the girls never saw their father and mother again."

"Oh, how hateful! I think it's a horrid story."

"Their brother they did see; he rose to a high position in Canada, and after many years returned to see his sisters. One of them married a gentleman in the Hebrides, and the story was told to me by an old lady nearly ninety years old, her granddaughter."

"And were you trying to tell it as she told it?" asked Madge.

"Yes, I tried to use her words, but it has taken a long time, and I must go without answering another question. Good-bye all."

"Come again soon; and thanks for the story," cried several voices.

"Yes, I will come again before long."

"And when will you decide about the prize?"

"The first day you are in London with me. Good-bye again;" and he made his escape.

CHAPTER XI.

MAKING THE BEST OF IT.

I AM not going to give you much account of the next six weeks, and how they passed. A Christmas-time which most of the party spent in bed, and the rest in coughing, could not be very cheerful; but happily no one was very ill, though some were rather cross; and some made the best, and some the worst of their misfortunes. Uncle Harry was as good as his word, and came several times to see them, but in spite of his visits, it was a dull time. Ella had come home, but was not allowed to come near them. Aunt Lilia, who always did stay with them at Christmas, was away with their father and mother; all their other aunts but one were married, and had children, and though they wrote kind letters to the Hiltons, they could not, of course, come and see them. Aunt Eliza, the only unmarried aunt, no one was very fond of, and she did not

offer to come and see them; and perhaps it was just as well she stayed away.

"Altogether," as Madge said one day, "we are the forlornest family, just now, and it's the funniest Christmas-time I ever remember."

"I don't fink it's Christmas," said Robin, sagely.

"But it is, you little donkey," observed Jack, "and all your 'finking' won't alter it."

"It doesn't matter what you say; if I don't fink it's Christmas, then it isn't to me, and I don't feel so bad," said Robin, placidly; but as Jack seemed inclined to resent this as "cheek," Madge had to interpose to keep the peace.

She had hard work to do so sometimes; but one way and another, time wore on, and every one was truly thankful when, about six weeks after Christmas, they had all ceased making that dreadful whooping noise; and the doctor pronounced that he would now give them a clean bill of health, and they might go away for change of air as soon as ever they liked.

What a joyful letter was written to Uncle Harry that day! Gerald wrote it, and they all, down to Robin, signed it; and I really believe Uncle Harry was almost as glad to

get it as they were to send it. He came down to see them the very next day, and arranged that the following Tuesday the whole eight were to come to London, while Mrs. Willis went to her son and daughter, and Nurse took Daisy and Frances to the sea.

There was only one drawback to the perfect felicity caused by this arrangement. When Mr. Henry Hilton spoke to Mrs. Willis about the family plans, she thought it her duty to tell him that the eight children ought not to be left to themselves during the hours he was away at business, as they would certainly get into some trouble or other.

"But what am I to do?" he inquired. "My house will only just take in the children. I have no room for any one else to take care of them."

Mrs. Willis ventured to suggest that Mademoiselle—who had nowhere to go if she had a holiday given her—should come up to town every day and remain some hours, so that the children might have someone to control them, and also might not lose the habit of speaking French.

Perhaps Uncle Harry himself did not much

care about this plan, for he pulled his moustache a good deal over it, but when Mrs. Willis proceeded to urge that the holidays, such as they were, had already lasted very long, and that Mr. Hilton was very anxious about the children's progress, he did not think it right to oppose it, and he took upon himself the dreadful task of breaking the news to the young folks.

It was not received with pleasure by any of them, but perhaps no one was so deeply annoyed as Leslie. She thought herself quite competent to take charge of all the rest—though, indeed, her taking charge was rather apt to take the form of giving peremptory orders, which were not much attended to by her younger brothers; and besides, she had been looking forward to being, in a fashion, the lady of the house—the mistress, for the time, at her uncle's. Now, if Mademoiselle were to be there for a great part of the day, she would never be able to take any other position than that of being under Mademoiselle. I don't mean to say that Leslie thought all this out in words, but she felt it all in a minute, for feeling is a quicker thing than thinking. She was angry, though she said nothing

and all her old ill-feelings towards Mademoiselle revived.

Nevertheless it was a very merry party that gathered round Uncle Harry's table on the Tuesday evening, Leslie sitting at the head with great dignity, Madge on her right hand, Robin opposite her, and the rest anyhow. The harmony of the proceedings was not at all disturbed by Uncle Harry's announcement that he had thought one day's whole holiday would be so good for Mademoiselle that she was not to appear till Thursday.

Even Robin gave a little chuckle or chirp of pleasure at that, though he was sitting very quiet and demure in his corner. He had had a very narrow escape of not coming at all, and now he was under orders to stay in the house altogether for two or three days, for he had managed to catch cold since Uncle Harry's visit, and Nurse and Mrs. Willis had been rather unwilling to let him out of their sight. However, the doctor had said the change might do him good, and so, muffled up till nothing could be seen of him but his nose, he had been allowed to come.

"And how about the essays?" asked

Uncle Harry when the cloth had been withdrawn.

Nobody spoke, though one or two suppressed giggles were heard.

"What! has nobody written?'

"Only two have got finished, Uncle Harry. but you are not to know whose they are."

"Dear me; is that all?" said Uncle Harry, "Why, I shall have to give a first and second prize. And now where are these two?"

Two rolls of blue paper were produced and solemnly handed to Uncle Harry, who unrolled them, laid them both before him, cleared his throat with a loud "Ahem!" and began to read.

Essay the First—

"ON MAKING THE BEST OF THINGS.

"Making the best of things is much the same as looking on the bright side. Most things in this world are like the moon; they have one side very bright, and the other very dark indeed. The sun always has the bright side turned to him, but that is because he shines so brightly on it himself, and if we look at things brightly and cheerfully, they will show their bright side to us.

"At times, however, it is very hard to do this. Things look bad, and are bad, and we feel as if we cannot make the best of them, as if it were no good trying, for there is no best—it is all bad. For instance, we have some great disappointment, something we have set our hearts upon does not happen, or happens in such a way that we can have no pleasure in it, and we feel that we cannot make the best of it; and perhaps, most trying of all, older people tell us that it is all for our good. Well, we do not believe them; and perhaps long ago, if they had had our troubles, they would not have thought so either, but there is something in it. If we make up our minds that, supposing it cannot be helped, there is no use in fretting, and so take it cheerfully, the bright side will turn towards us, and we shall make things far better than they would have been if we had grumbled, and been cross.

"I have read a motto which I like very much; it is this, 'Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, and bear bravely whatever happens.' Whoever can do that will certainly 'make the best of things.'"

"Bravo!" said Uncle Harry, laying down

the paper and looking round on all the eager faces, "a capital essay. The other must be good indeed to beat it. But I can't guess whose it is."

"Don't try, please; you must not try," cried someone, and like the dutiful uncle he was, he took up the other paper.

Essay Number Two—

"ON MAKING THE BEST OF THINGS."

"The subject of this essay is a most important one, because it is a matter that affects not one day of our lives, but every day—not one part of our lives, but all our lives. Things pleasant or unpleasant, bad or good, happen to us every day; and of them all we can make the best or the worst, just as we choose.

"Sometimes it happens, perhaps, that a bit of our lives is very dull and uninteresting, we cannot do what we would like to do, and we have to do a great deal that is tiresome and uninteresting. Well, if we keep on thinking how tiresome it is, and how vexed we are, we shall only grow more and more vexed, and the annoying things will grow more and more annoying, and we shall do our work badly,

and feel far worse in the end than if we had made up our minds to it cheerfully, and faced it as well as we could.

"More than that, it does us good if we look at it so—makes us wiser and better, and more able to stand up against the next bad thing that may happen to us.

> "'For every evil under the sun
> There is a remedy or there's none.
> If there is one, try to find it;
> If there is none, never mind it.'

"But it is not only of bad things we need to make the best. We ought to remember that of good things, too, there is a best to be made, and not waste our chances. Some people who, perhaps, seem to have very little to make them happy, make the best of it so well that they are very happy; while others, who have everything they want, are like the princess with a pea under thirty-nine down beds, and make themselves miserable about some little thing."

"They are both very good indeed," said Uncle Harry. "Really, I can hardly believe I have got such wise nephews, or nieces, whichever they are," he said smiling.

"One of each," someone observed.

"Which has got the prize—which is best?"

"Oh, do say quickly!' cried Dick and Dolly.

"Well, on the whole, I think the second is a little the best; but both are so good that there must be two prizes."

"And whose are they? Do guess!"

"Well," said Uncle Harry, very slowly, looking round the group. "I guess the first was Madge's;" and a general clapping of hands proclaimed that he was right.

"The second was Leslie's. No? I certainly thought it was. Whose, then? It must be Gerald's, I think. Yes, that is right, I see. I think on the whole you will not mind if I make the two prizes even, and you shall choose them for yourselves;" and drawing two bright sovereigns from his pocket, he passed one to Madge and rolled the other to Gerald.

"I like both essays very much," he said. "I was pleased, Gerald, with what you said about making the best of good things, as well as of bad ones; and another part of yours

reminded me of some lines by George Herbert. He is speaking of sermons, and how people complain of bad ones; and he says,

> "'If all want sense,
> God takes a text and preaches patience.'

That is the true spirit in which to make the best of trying things."

The children were silent at that, till Uncle Harry spoke again. "Did no one else write?" he asked.

"Oh yes; we did," said Fred and Dick and Dolly, "but we couldn't make up anything."

Jack had tried also, but his attempt, half-finished, lay tossing about his bedroom at the Grange. Leslie was secretly thinking that she wished she had tried; she knew she could easily have made a better essay than either Gerald or Madge—and so she could.

"I did try," said Robin suddenly. "An' I wroted mine down, too; but I hadn't much to say." And he began pulling something out of his pocket.

"Let's have it then, Robin," said Uncle Harry cheerfully; and after some struggling with various odd trifles, that would come out

of his pockets instead of what he wanted, Robin produced a crumpled piece of paper, which he handed to his uncle, who smoothed it out carefully, and read—

"MAKING THE BEST OF THINGS."

"If you make the best of things, it will be the better for you; and if you make the worst of them, it'll be the worse for you. That's all I've got to say. ROBIN HILTON."

"And that's the pith of the whole matter, too. Well done, Robin! There must be consolation prizes for those who didn't succeed, and even for those who didn't try, too. Here they are," and to all but Gerald and Madge he dealt out half-a-sovereign apiece—"to be spent in London," he said.

Surely he was the most delightful uncle that ever any children possessed! Robin certainly thought so, as a few minutes later he made his way slowly up to bed with his half-sovereign shut tight in his hot little palm, and his head full of what he would do with it.

After he had gone to bed, Uncle Harry said to the others, "I will take some of you the day after to-morrow to see the Queen pass

when she goes to open parliament. I did not choose to speak of it before Robin, for I know he wishes very much to see the Queen, and he cannot go, so do not talk to him about it. I will take care he sees her before you leave London."

But Uncle Harry did not know that it was on seeing the Queen open parliament that Robin's little heart was so set, for he still had before him the fanciful vision that had been called up in his childish mind by Ella's words long ago—a vision of the Queen alighting from her carriage, with a crown on her head and with a shining gold key in her hand, unlocking the great door into parliament.

CHAPTER XII.

UP IN LONDON.

Uncle Harry gave himself, as well as the children, a whole holiday next day, and devoted himself entirely to them: pictures in the morning to please the elder ones, luncheon at a shop; Madame Tussaud in the afternoon to please the younger ones, and driving to the different places in Hansoms, made up a good deal of pleasure for them. Robin, of course, could not go out; but inasmuch as Uncle Harry had provided him with a paint-box and a box of chocolate, he did not much mind. Besides, Uncle Harry had a very nice elderly housekeeper, who took a great fancy to the little fellow, and petted him to his heart's content.

Indeed, when the others came home full of all they had seen and done, Dick and Dolly very nearly quarrelled with Robin because he said he would not believe that they had had a nicer time than he had.

"But all the kings and queens with crowns and grand dresses on, Robin! We saw all those."

"And all the people that ever murdered people, too," added Dick.

"I don't care," said Robin, "they're only wax images. I don't want to see waxen images of kings, or of murderers either." Then after a little pause, "I shouldn't wonder, either, if a waxen image wasn't just the same as a graven image."

"Oh! oh!" cried Dick and Dolly together, greatly shocked. "As if Uncle Harry would have taken us to see them, if it had been naughty to make them," continued Dolly in a very reproving tone; and Madge, coming in then, was appealed to at once by both.

"Madge, Robin says waxen images and graven images are the same thing! Isn't it naughty of him?"

"I didn't say so!" said Robin stoutly. "I said 'I shouldn't wonder.'"

"You *are* a naughty boy, when Uncle Harry is so kind!"

Robin's lip quivered at that, but Madge

said, "Tell me what you meant, Robin. You didn't mean to be naughty?"

"No; but I don't know what a graven image is, and I don't see why it's wrong to make one kind of image, and not another, if they *are* different."

"A graven image is cut out of stone, but it wasn't that that was wrong. Oh, Robin, you know that it *really* means that they might not worship them, not that they might not make them."

All the children were silenced at that.

"I forgot," muttered Robin, and said no more.

That night, as Robin lay in his little bed, half-dreaming, half-awake, he heard Fred and Jack whispering outside his door.

"Is Uncle Harry going to take us all to-morrow?" asked Fred.

"I think so—all but Robin. He mustn't go out, you know."

"It'll be awfully jolly to see the Queen! How often does she go to parliament?"

"Oh, I don't know! Shut up now, or you'll wake the little beggar in there; and he's not to hear about it."

They stopped talking; but Robin had already heard enough, and fancied more. He sat up to try and hear if anything else was said, but he could catch no more, and when Fred came in a little later, he was lying with his head under the bed-clothes, apparently sound asleep.

But he was very far from being asleep. No dreams now; he had too much to think about. Could it really be true that the others were going to see this great sight which he had thought so much of, and so long wished to see?

It was months ago—he could not tell how long ago it was, but it seemed to him almost as if it were all his little life, for it was before mother went away—that he had first begun to fancy what the opening of parliament must be like.

He could not remember—his head got so hot with thinking, as he rolled it about on his pillow—he could not remember who had first told him about the great door and the gold key, but he was quite sure someone had told him, "The Queen opens parliament herself:" he could hear the words

now quite distinctly, and of course that meant that she undid the door. And the key—the gold key, he was quite sure about that too; when he shut his eyes he could almost see it shining with gold and bright stones. Oh, surely somehow or other it must happen that he would see the sight after all,—that he would not be the one left out!

Long, long he lay awake, turning over and over, and thinking. It never occurred to him to ask Uncle Harry to let him go as his cold was better, nor did he make any plans, only his busy little brain was full of thoughts that went on and on, and came over and over again, and made him feel as if he could not stop them, and even when at last he fell asleep his dreams were so like his waking thoughts that he could not tell one from the other.

Morning came at length—bright and sunny, though it was only February—and woke Robin from a late sleep. It had seemed to him a very long, odd night—he had been awake so often; and now he started up with a feeling that something strange was going to happen.

Ah! but he remembered in a minute what it was, and lay down again. It seemed to have

come so near, this sight so long wished for, and he was not to see it. He could hardly bear it.

No one noticed the little boy's white face, or silent ways at breakfast, and immediately afterwards Uncle Harry went out, taking Gerald and Jack with him; Mademoiselle came, and they were all obliged to settle to some lessons.

The little ones got on well enough, but Mademoiselle had brought a message from Mrs. Willis which she had given after the children had left the Grange. It was a message specially to Leslie and Madge, that she expected them to write an account of the principal sights they visited—in French one day, and in German the next, and that Mademoiselle would correct it daily.

Now this was rather trying to them both. Perhaps it was a mistake on Mrs. Willis's part to give such an order at all, but what really annoyed this foolish Leslie was that the message came through Mademoiselle. She did not mind what vexed Madge,—"having to turn," as she said, "all their pleasures half into a lesson,"—but she was thoroughly cross, and

angry—very uncivil to say the least—to Mademoiselle; and even forgot herself so far as to mutter in English something which Fred's ears were quick enough to catch, about "not more than half believing Mrs. Willis had ever said any such thing!" However, fortunately, Mademoiselle's ears were not so quick as Fred's, and she did not notice it, and the morning's work came to an end; but Leslie's ill-humour brought trouble later on.

In due time Uncle Harry came home, and the whole party set out for their afternoon, leaving Robin apparently quite as contented as yesterday, with his paints and pictures. They remembered afterwards that he never once asked them where they were going; but before dinner Jack had found him staring very intently at a big map of London. He started and half turned away when Jack came in, and then asked him "whereabouts parliament was."

"At Westminster, to be sure, little stupid," was Jack's answer; and then, in a condescending manner he showed him where the house they were in was in the map, and what

a short way it really was to Westminster. "That's if you know it," added Jack. "*I* know my way perfectly about London. I could find my way *anywhere*," and Robin asked no more.

It was a lovely afternoon for the time of year, and you may be sure that all those who went with Uncle Harry had a very jolly time. They saw the procession both going and returning, and had a capital view of the Queen and Princess Beatrice.

"I shall see them often when I'm at Eton," said Gerald to Madge, as he stood looking earnestly after the carriage, while the band played and the people cheered.

They saw the Prince and Princess of Wales too, and the Duke of Edinburgh; but none of the royal grand-children were there, which was rather a pity.

However, the carriages and horses, and the Life Guards, the gay scene and the crowds, quite came up to what they had expected; no one was at all disappointed, unless it were Dolly, who had privately indulged in an idea of a Queen more like a picture of Queen Elizabeth which they had at home, with a

crown on and a high ruff,—but she kept her fancies to herself.

They returned home rather late—it was after five o'clock certainly, and the dusk was drawing on fast.

Uncle Harry opened the door with his latch key; but the housekeeper, Mrs. Jones, came up as the children crowded in, and at the sight of Uncle Harry she said rather reproachfully—

"You came back to fetch Master Robin then, sir? Poor little man! I thought it was a shame he shouldn't be out this lovely day—but you might have left a message for me that you had taken him."

"Master Robin?" said Uncle Harry, astonished. "He did not go with us?"

"No, sir, I know; but you came back for him?"

"Robin has not been with us all the afternoon!" said Mr. Hilton. "I left him in the house in your charge."

Mrs. Jones stared helplessly at the group now clustered closely round her and Mr. Hilton. "Not with you, sir," she said feebly. "No more he is, I see. Oh, lor! oh, lor! whatever has become of the poor dear young

gentleman?" and she showed signs of crying.

"Nonsense! he must be in the house," Mr. Hilton said incredulously. "Tell me at once what has happened."

"Well, sir, you left Master Robin sitting with his paints like a little dear, and as happy as possible, and I just popped up once or twice to see him, for fear he should be lonesome like; and the last time as I was up, there came a knock at the front door and a ring at the area bell all in a minute, as one may say. And I'd let one of the girls out to do a little shopping, so I opened the front door myself, and it was nothing but a note for Miss Leslie—it's lying there now."

"Well, what next?—make haste," said Mr. Hilton.

"And I saw as it was the butcher at the area gate, so I ran down the kitchen steps, for I wanted to speak my mind about that last sirloin, which was cut shameful to see, and I left Master Robin here in the hall"—and there again Mrs. Jones came to a full stop.

"He must be in the house still," said Gerald.

"Well, sir, all I know is, I came up the stairs again, and Master Robin wasn't here—and there's his little hat and coat and comforter gone too—so in course I thought Master or one of you young gentlemen had come back for him, being as it was such a fine day, and had come in with the key; so as I hadn't heard you, but I did think, to be sure, as you might have rung the bell to let me know."

The children looked at each other in blank dismay, feeling all the more alarmed because even Uncle Harry's face showed signs of disturbance.

"You've looked for him, of course?"

"In course, sir. Why, it wasn't till I'd looked the house over, as I may say, that I noticed his hat and coat were gone."

"He must be hiding, for a joke!" said Madge, who nevertheless looked rather frightened.

"Oh yes," said Gerald, hopefully; "and he's taken his hat and things to give you a scare, Mrs. Jones. Jack and I will find him in five minutes."

"Well, sir, you *may*. I'll not say it's impossible; but——" and Mrs. Jones shook her

head dejectedly. And sure enough, the boys, aided by Uncle Harry, searched in vain,—it was soon too clear that Robin was not in the house.

"He can't have got out," said Madge, when they were all in the hall again; "he couldn't reach to undo the door."

That was quite true. The other children tried, and neither Dick nor Dolly, no, nor even Fred, could unfasten the latch, which was very high up.

This added to the mystery. They began searching again, and calling, "Robin! Robin! where are you?" all over the house, but there was no answer.

"He's tumbled into some dreadful place like I did," said Dolly, on the point of crying; but the difficulty about that was, that there was no place for him to tumble into.

"He *must* have left the house," said Mr. Hilton at last. "I will go out at once and give notice to the police. Is it possible, Mrs. Jones, that any one could have entered the house and taken the child off?"

"Not possible, sir," with again a dolorous shake of the head. "No one could have got

in unless they had your key, sir. Dear me, dear me! to think of the poor young gentleman being spirited off like this!"

"And I had my key with me. I must go out at once;—no, Gerald, you had better not come;" and hurriedly putting on again his overcoat and hat he went, leaving a very dejected-looking group behind him.

This was far worse than when Dolly was lost, though Gerald and Jack did laugh all the fears of the others to scorn, and declare that no child could get lost in London, as the police would take care of them.

"Robin's not like a baby," added Gerald; "he knows where this house is, and all about it—he's sharp enough."

But Madge thought of the dense crowds they had seen that day; and the idea of Robin alone, lost in such a crowd as that, made her heart sink with fear.

Leslie had read her note, but they could hardly attend to it, though it proved to be from Ella Carew, to say that she and her grandmother had come up to the house in London, and that she hoped they had by this time all done coughing and would be allowed to come

to tea with her one day next week. "I am just *pining* to see you and Madge again," the letter ended, "you *must* persuade your uncle to let you come." At another time such a prospect would have been almost too delightfully exciting, but now they scarcely thought or spoke of it.

It got quite dark, and presently Mrs. Jones herself came up to light the gas, and to ask if they would have dinner.

"We had better wait for Uncle Harry," said Leslie, listlessly; "we can't have it till he comes back."

"But I am so dreadfully hungry," said Dick, piteously. "I don't see why we should have nothing to eat, if Robin *is* lost."

"No more do I," said Dolly; and Mrs. Jones carried off the hungry pair to be regaled with bread-and-jam in the kitchen, while silence again fell on the older ones who remained upstairs, and sat gloomily round the fire.

Suddenly—rat-tat-tat-tat, rat-tat-tat—there was a tremendous knocking at the door, followed by an equally loud peal of the bell.

"Uncle Harry come back!" cried Leslie, as they all started to their feet.

"No; he wouldn't knock. Oh, if it's to say something has happened to Robin!" said Madge, trembling.

But Gerald and Jack and Fred raced to the door and got it open.

There on the doorstep stood a tall footman, a little boy,—Robin beyond all doubt,—and a young lady about Leslie's size, who, seizing Robin by the hand, ran in, crying—

"Here he is! I've brought him back to you. Oh, weren't you all in a dreadful fright about him? Wasn't it lucky I found him?"

It was Ella Carew.

Before there had been time to explain anything, or do more than kiss Ella, hug Robin (who looked decidedly dirty), and utter about a dozen delighted exclamations, the click of Uncle Harry's key was heard in the latch.

"No, I can hear nothing of the child, Mrs. Jones," he said, as he passed through the hall and walked straight into the dining-room.

"Why, Robin!" were his very next words, and the change of tone set most of the children off laughing. "What has happened to you;

and who is this?" as his eye fell upon Ella.

"Oh, this is Ella Carew, our great friend, Uncle Harry," cried Madge. "She has brought Robin back."

"And pray, where did she find him?" asked Uncle Harry cheerily, as he shook hands with Ella; but the answer to that question must wait till another chapter.

CHAPTER XIII.

TO SEE THE QUEEN.

It took a very long time to hear Ella's and Robin's stories, and longer still to put them together, to make sense, for they interrupted each other so much. Indeed, Ella had to go home before Robin's share was more than half told; so perhaps it will be best to tell you straight on just what had befallen the little boy.

When the others had gone out, and he heard the door shut after them, he sat a few minutes looking at his paints and his paintings, and doing nothing. At first he did not seem to mind it much, he could hardly believe it was true that it was his long dreamt-of sight the others were going to see; but then quite suddenly all the bright, wonderful things he fancied they would see seemed to come clearly before his eyes. He put down his paint-brush, and looked hopelessly out of the window.

"Robin stood and watched him gravely. The little shoeblack spun his button five times, and then looked up in Robin's face and said, 'Could you do that?'"

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The house felt like a prison to him, he could almost have cried, only he was too miserable even to do that. Then Mrs. Jones came up, and he seized his brush so that she might not see how unhappy he was, but when she had gone he laid it down again. He could see nothing amusing from the window, at least nothing that amused him just now, though at another time an organ with a monkey, a little girl with two dogs, or even the passing carriages would have pleased him well enough.

When Mrs. Jones came up for her second visit, he followed her into the hall at the sound of the door bell. But the note was not interesting. He was just turning away when suddenly he saw that Mrs. Jones, in her hurry to get down to speak her mind to the butcher, had not shut the door. She had pushed it close—fancied she had shut the latch, but a tiny line of light all the way down betrayed that it was not closed.

What a jump Robin's heart gave as he saw that!

"What did you think of doing?" someone asked him, when he was telling his story.

"I did not fink of anyfing," he said, lisping; "I just got my fings, and was out in a minute, and never finked at all."

That was probably quite true. His mind was so full of the one idea of the show, that when the opportunity offered itself of getting out, and so being at least a degree nearer it, he seized it without a thought of the consequences.

Long before Mrs. Jones had finished her complaints to the butcher—having called him into the kitchen to look at the bone of the disputed sirloin,—Robin had slipped out at the hall door, shutting it very softly after him, and was round the corner, making his way as fast as his legs would carry him.

As soon as he was well out of sight of the house, he went a little more slowly, and began to think what he would do. He was not a bit frightened—not a bit, he was too much excited and too ignorant of danger to be afraid, and he knew where he wanted to go. To parliament—everyone in London must know where that was, of course—but of whom should he ask his way?

He would not ask a policeman: he did not

think he would ask a grown-up person at all; no, it would be nicer to ask someone nearer his own size; and he strolled slowly along, looking out for some such person.

The streets were very full, and would have been most amusing, only his whole mind was so set on the one thing. Presently, however, he saw on the footpath in front of him a small shoeblack with a red cap. This shoeblack was much smaller than any shoeblack Robin had ever seen before, and he was more interesting, for as he sat on the curbstone he was spinning a bright brass button on the top of his blacking box. He set it off spinning, and then, before it had time to go over the edge, quick as thought he caught the box up in his hands, and balanced it so dexterously that the button never had a chance of falling off till its spinning was done, when he set down the box and began again.

Robin stood and watched him gravely. The little shoeblack spun his button five times, and then looked up in Robin's face and said, "Could you do that?"

"No," said Robin. "You must be very clever."

"Clever! why, that's nothing! I could do that five hundred times and not miss. There's our Joe—he can stand on his 'ed and sing, 'We don't want to fight.' That's clever, if you like!"

"My brother Gerald can frow a ball farther than any boy in his school," said Robin.

"An' our Joe's the sharpest boy in all Lon'on. He knows his way anywheres, he does. Nobody can't take him in."

Robin tried to think of something even more wonderful that Gerald or Jack could do. "Gerald got two prizes last Christmas," he ventured to say.

"Prizes! what's that? Why, every lad in my class in Sunday School gets a prize. I don't think nothing o' that!"

Robin was silenced, and stood looking down at the little shoeblack still seated on his stone. He was rather a droll-looking little fellow, with merry brown eyes, with half a squint in them, a fairly clean face and tangled curly brown hair. Robin looked at him with respect, as possessing such a wonderful brother as "our Joe," and living in the street always and

earning money his own self, enough to live on. No doubt this boy could tell him his way, so he began—

"Can you tell me where I want to go?"

"'Pends on whether you know it yourself," said the boy, with a chuckle.

"I mean," said Robin, "could you tell me the way. I want to go to parliament."

"Parl'ment. Wot! you mean the 'Ouses o' Parl'ment? Them big buildings down Westminster way?"

"Yes, it's a very big place, I know," said Robin, "with a big door."

"What on 'arth does a little chap like you want theer? I could show yer the way, fast enough."

"Oh, do!" said Robin, eagerly. "Father goes to parliament when he's at home, but he's in New Zealand now with mother, because she's ill, you know, and——"

"Yer father in parl'ment? Why, he must be some sort o' swell then?"

"I don't know," said Robin, simply "but you see, to-day is the day the Queen goes to open the parliament, and she undoes the door with a big gold key her own self."

"Gammon!" said the little shoeblack.

"No; it's quite—quite true," answered Robin, earnestly.

The little shoeblack considered a minute. "Well, if yer father's in parl'ment, you ought to know for certain; but it's uncommon odd I never heard tell of a sight like that. I've seen her drive past often enough—that's nothing; and I did 'ear say as she were goin' to do sommat to-day. But howsomedever, if you likes to come along o' me, I'll take you to Westminster, an' we'll see what's to be seen."

"Oh, thank you," said Robin, "it's very kind of you."

"Kind?—gammon!" said the little shoeblack, catching up his box and pocketing his button. "Come along."

It would take too long to tell you all the streets by which the little shoeblack led Robin: some small and crowded, some wide and comparatively empty; but Robin had perfect faith in his guide, and probably they took as short a way as could have been found.

Robin found that his friend's name was Bob —that was all, apparently; at least, he would tell him no more.

"That's the same as my name," he said confidentially. "Robert Hilton is my name, only they call me Robin."

"'Tain't the same," said Bob. "What nonsense yer talk!"

"I thought Bob was short for Robert?"

"It may be short or long for anything or nothing as I knows on. I'm called Bob, an' nothin' else—and that's all about it."

Robin was abashed, and trotted along beside him in silence, till Bob said,

"I say, I didn't think of it afore, but how come you out alone? Don't your sort generally 'ave a nurse or someone for ever runnin' after 'em."

"I haven't a nurse," said Robin. "I have a governess. Nurse takes care of the little ones."

"An' you're a big un, are you? Well, I shouldn't a-thought it. But wot's a gov'ness?"

"Well, she teaches us."

"Oh, a teacher! But she don't look arter you out o' school?"

"Yes, she lives with us. She's at home now; but we are staying with Uncle Harry."

"There's more on yer, then?"—and Robin

soon told the names and ages of all his brothers and sisters, and learnt in return that besides "our Joe" Bob had two brothers; one a big chap, "a coster"—Robin did not know what that might be; but supposed it was rather grand, as his companion evidently thought so—the other, a little one. Bob and Joe were twins and both shoeblacks; father and mother they had none, but lived all together in a place that Bob called "Tibb's Court, out o' Shoe Lane."

"Little Bill, he's lame he is, but he's a jolly little chap, for all that. He lies there and yarns away—you'd laugh to hear him."

"Can't he walk at all?"

"Not much. He could, maybe, if he'd a right sort o' crutch or somethin'. Joe an' me, we're a-savin' up to get him one."

"Why doesn't your big brother get him one?"

Bob shrugged his shoulders. "He's enough to do with his 'arnings 'ithout that. He don't take much for our keep, you see; an' then he drinks a bit now and then—an' that takes money."

"But he shouldn't do that," said Robin.

"Wot's that to you?" retorted Bob fiercely,

"Why shouldn't he, if he likes? An' he never knocks us about when he is tight, neither. You'd best not say aught ag'in him, I can tell you."

Robin was frightened to say any more, so he walked along with his hand in his pocket, pinching the half-sovereign that lay safely at the bottom, and wondering how much crutches cost, and if Bob and Joe would let him help, when they suddenly turned out of the narrow, rather dirty, street which they had been hurrying along for some time, into a much wider one, where they saw before them a great throng of people, and could catch a glimpse of mounted soldiers over the heads of the crowd.

"Come on," cried Bob, "we're near Westminster now; an' wotever there is to see, we'll see it."

Robin had shrunk back, half frightened at the sight of the crowd; but the thought of being so near made him bolder again. Bob caught him by the hand, and they pushed their way together, squeezing through the crowd where bigger people could not have got along at all. Several people looked wonderingly

after the odd little pair, but no one stopped them; and before long, Robin could see the grey towers of the Abbey, and then on beyond, a great tall tower with a clock in it, and a glimpse of a long stretch of grey buildings below it—rather like a church, he thought.

But the crowd was at its thickest; and the two rows of soldiers and mounted police keeping the road clear for the Queen, lay between them and the place where they wished to be.

"There's the 'Ouses o' Parl'ament," said Bob, pointing out this long building, as they stopped to get breath at a spot where the crowd was less thick, "but we'll have a bit of a job to get there."

He stood holding Robin for a minute or two, till a little shifting of the crowd gave him the chance he wanted. For an instant it seemed a little less thick; he seized the right moment, and, pushing through fast, they found themselves on the edge of the crowd, where the soldiers were keeping the line. Another pause, very close to the heels of a horse ridden by a soldier, brilliant in scarlet and gold, then a hasty dash and rush, under the nose of one horse, behind the tail of another, and

they were safe on the other side of the street, but panting and breathless with excitement. What an adventure this was! Robin was generally rather afraid of horses, but he had not time even to think of that to-day, or indeed of anything else.

They had not tried to pass through the second line of crowd, but were still on the edge of it, close to the open centre of the street, when suddenly a great roar of sound, that made Robin tremble with excitement, began in the crowd beyond the boys, but not on the side where they had expected to hear it.

"Hurrah! hurrah! they're coming!" shrieked Bob; and sure enough the roar got louder and louder, and in two minutes a mounted guard of soldiers appeared all in scarlet and gold, followed by one, and another, and another carriage, till six had passed; and one came, drawn by cream-coloured horses, more splendid than all the rest, in which sat two ladies.

"Theer—that's the Queen! that's her an' Princess Beatrice," cried Bob; and he and Robin pulled off their caps and shouted to their hearts' content.

A guard of soldiers followed the Queen's carriage closely, and a band on horseback, too, playing a merry tune. Then followed the Prince and Princess of Wales, the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, and the Duke of Cambridge, in their carriages; and Bob seemed to know all of them quite well by sight. Then came a string of other carriages, and then all at once the soldiers and policemen, who had been keeping the line, moved on ; and the crowd for an instant filled the whole street, and then quickly began to break up and disappear.

"I say!" cried Bob, "I never thought on it, when they were goin' flashin' by like, but——"

"What?" asked Robin, who had certainly thought of nothing either while that gay procession was passing.

"Why, we're a day behind the fair. It's all over 'fore we got 'ere. The Queen's gone 'ome."

Too true, though Robin could hardly believe it. He looked down towards the towers and up along the street the procession had taken, bright with many-coloured flags, and it seemed clear enough that the Queen had

passed them, going from Westminster. But he was still so much excited with what he had seen, that he could not feel much disappointed about what he had not seen.

Besides, at that moment, the sound of a band was heard again. It was only a drum-and-fife to be sure, but it diverted Robin's thoughts, and proved to be a school band marching behind the school children, who had been allowed to come to see the Queen. A rabble of other children followed after it, pretending to march, and among them was a little shoe-black, stepping grandly along with his head thrown well back and beating time on his box with his brush, as if it were a drum.

Robin was staring at him, feeling as if he had seen him somewhere before, when Bob darted from his side crying, "Ullo, Joe!" —and the little drummer stopped. Robin saw that he was exactly like Bob, squint and all.

"Why, Bob! this is a new lay for you! Who's this you've got?" inquired "our Joe," looking curiously at Robin.

"It's a little lad as got me to bring him down 'ere—he wanted to see the Queen open

parl'ment; but she was off 'ome again when we got 'ere."

"He's a little un to be out like that alone. You mind you don't get into no scrapes, Bob, my lad."

Robin did not venture yet to speak to such a great being as the sharpest lad in London; but Bob answered eagerly,

"Oh no; he's a jolly little chap! But I say, Joe, he says as his father's in parl'ment an' that when the Queen opens parl'ment, she unlocks the big door herself with a big gold key. Did you ever hear tell of that?"

"Never! 'tain't so," said Joe, emphatically. "Som'un 'as green-eyed the young 'un. But," reproachfully, "I'd ha' thought you'd ha' been sharper nor that, Bob!"

"Are you quite sure she doesn't? asked Robin, taking courage.

"Sure an' sart'n. Why, I seen it myself this arternoon. The doors is all open long afore she comes, an' lots o' folks as grand as grand goin' in; an' when she comes they're all waitin' for her, an' she gits out o' the coach, and hup the steps an' hin, same as anybody else."

Robin gave a deep sigh to the memory of his cherished dream, but he never thought of doubting Joe's word. Certainly someone had made a terrible mistake. It was a great pity. The short day was closing in, and he had never thought of getting home yet; but Joe's next words were, "Oughtn't you to be getting back to yer 'ome, young 'un? Where do yer 'ang out?"

"I'm staying with Uncle Harry," said Robin, "at——" but there he came to a dead stop. His tired little head could not recall the name of the street.

"Can't you remember?" asked his friends; but all in vain he tried, and tried, and tried again to recollect it.

Joe shrugged his shoulders with a little contempt, and poor Robin burst into tears.

"Nay, don't blubber," said Bob, consolingly; "we'll get back to my stand, and I'll bet you know your way from there."

Robin rubbed away his tears at that. He thought he could find his way from there, but "Oh," he said, "I am so hungry, and it is such a long way! Can't we get something to eat?"

Bob and Joe looked at each other. "Got any money, little 'un?" said Joe kindly, and Robin produced his precious half-sovereign which, wonderful to relate, was quite safe.

But Joe shook his head. "I can't change that," he said. "Folks 'ud think I'd been stealing. Maybe you can though, as you've got good clothes."

The brothers consulted, and then took Robin to a shop in a side street, and made him go in and ask for change. At first it was refused; then a woman called him back and asked where he got it, and on his answering that Uncle Harry gave it to him, she laughed, patted his cheek, gave him ten shillings, and bade him make haste home.

Very triumphant the three went off to a cocoa shop known to the shoeblacks, where hot cocoa and scones seemed to Robin a most delicious meal. But the people of the shop noticed the odd little trio; shoeblacks were common enough there, but not little boys like Robin, even though by this time he was tolerably dirty. Their meal took a good long time; Joe paid with Robin's money. "We have had a rare blow out," he said, as they left

the shop, but one of the women followed them to the door, looked into the dusky street after them, and then beckoned to a policeman.

Two minutes afterwards, as they walked cheerfully along, a hand was laid on Joe's shoulder, and a voice said, "Look here, my lad, where are you taking this young gentleman?"

All three started as they found a policeman so close beside them. Joe and Bob began a hurried series of explanations, "how they weren't adoin' any 'arm, and how they had met the young gentleman."

Robin thought they seemed frightened and that the policeman spoke very crossly, and summoning all his courage he said, "Please, they have been very kind to me?"

"And haven't they 'ad any money off you?" asked the policeman sternly.

"No," said Robin, eagerly, "though I do want to give them some of Uncle Harry's half-sovereign to help with little Bill's crutches."

"They've been begging, then! I thought as much!"

"No, no, they haven't! I tell you they haven't," said Robin, almost crying.

"Come along o' me, and I'll take you home, young gentleman," was the only reply, but when the policeman found that Robin did not know where he lived, he said they must all three go with him to the station, till he made inquiries.

It was now quite dark, and the three boys tramped on drearily enough behind their captor. It was a long way to the police station; Robin's little heart was filled with despair of ever getting home, and his legs ached so badly, that he could hardly get along at all. He was in misery about Madge and Uncle Harry and the others, who would never know where he was,—he was bitterly sorry he had ever come out. He walked so slowly that at last, just as they turned into a crowded well-lighted street, the policeman proposed to carry him, and even raised him in his arms, but Robin could not bear that indignity.

"No, no! put me down!" he shrieked; and his cry was so shrill and vehement that a young lady in a carriage standing by the pavement leant forward to see what was the matter.

Robin caught sight of her face and sprang

towards her. "Ella! Ella!" he screamed, clinging to the carriage door, "you know where Uncle Harry lives. Oh, do—do tell me!"

"*Robin!*" exclaimed Ella, in utter astonishment, "how came you here? Are you lost?"

"Yes," sobbed Robin, breaking down now there seemed a chance of safety, "and the policeman was taking me to prison!"

But the policeman came forward at that, and a few words of explanation to Ella's governess, who just then came out of a shop and got into the carriage, made matters clearer. Robin was lifted into the carriage and the policeman's number taken. The coachman was just going to drive on, when Robin cried, "But Joe and Bob—where are they? I haven't wished them good-bye, and they were so kind."

The policeman looked round, but Joe and Bob were gone; they had slipped away among the crowd at the very first chance.

"Oh, I am so sorry!" said Robin. "I never gave them anything for poor little Bill after all."

I need not repeat how Ella brought the

truant home, having had to go to her grandmother's first, because it was so late. Uncle Harry did not scold much; he only asked Robin if he thought he had done quite right—a question which Robin could not answer without holding down his head and looking dreadfully ashamed. Most fortunately he had not got any fresh cold. Nor did any one tease him for his fancy about the gold key, and the little boy never spoke of it again.

After all, little Bill did get a pair of crutches very soon, for Uncle Harry hunted up Joe and Bob in Tibb's Court, to thank them for being so kind to the little wanderer. Part of Robin's half-sovereign helped to pay for them, and nothing else that he bought with it gave him nearly as much pleasure.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOING TO THE PLAY.

For several days after Robin's adventure nothing very exciting happened among the Hilton children, though they managed to enjoy themselves a great deal, in spite of Mademoiselle's daily visits. Gerald had taken a fancy to go into the City with Uncle Harry in the morning, and they generally came back after luncheon to take the others out. Jack did not care for the wonderful stir and bustle of the City, nor the business of the works which pleased Gerald so much, nor for what he called "poking in dirty old streets, to find out where all sorts of stupid old kings and lords and barons lived and died." He had found a schoolfellow living near, who possessed a bicycle, and the two practised riding every morning round the square, while the girls and the little ones were at lessons.

Robin had been rather subdued and quiet

since his wanderings; Dick and Dolly had seen so much that they never ceased chattering to each other, or any one who would listen; but Fred was very much inclined to envy Jack, who had no lessons to do, and he was rather cross and troublesome with Mademoiselle; while Leslie was secretly rebelling against her authority more and more.

Things came to a climax at last, on the day when they were to take tea with Ella Carew. Until the day before, both Madge and Leslie had always managed to do the exercise which Mrs. Willis had desired them to write each day, giving an account of what they had seen or done; but that day Leslie was two days, and Madge one day, behind, partly because they had wasted time, partly because they had over-slept themselves.

Mademoiselle did not scold, only she said that she expected the exercises to be ready for her next morning without fail, "*Et je ne veux pas accepter des excuses frivoles*," she added. Leslie fancied these last words were directed specially at her, and she was furious, though at the moment she said nothing.

They all went to Mrs. Carew's together;

a large party, but Mrs. Carew knew them so well that she did not fear the undertaking of having them all at once. Indeed, the old lady saw very little of them, as they had tea with Ella and her governess downstairs, went up to the drawing-room for half an hour, where they were all very demure and quiet, while Gerald, like the polite boy he was, tried hard to talk to Mrs. Carew ; and then at her dinner time they all adjourned to the schoolroom again, and the fun of the evening began.

And it was good fun too. All the boys liked Ella. Gerald always held privately to the opinion that if any one could take the nonsense out of Leslie, it was Ella ; but he never ventured to say so, even to Madge. Jack and the others liked her because she was "such good fun."

They had a long talk : first about the acting, before Mr. and Mrs. Hilton went away, and all the fun they had then,—for the girls had only seen Ella once since that time, and the boys not at all,—and then they began to plan a new play to be acted in the summer, when Mr. and Mrs. Hilton should have come back again.

"It must be better than the last," said Leslie, "for we shall know more about it. Uncle Harry is going to take us to the play to-morrow."

"But it's 'Pinafore'; that's a singing play," objected Gerald. "We couldn't do that."

"No; but we may get ideas how to do it," said Madge. "Oh, Ella, I wish you were going too!"

"I vote we don't have a play of our own next time," said Jack, "but take a piece of a play as we do at school."

"Well, we can make up our minds by-and-by about that," said Ella. "Half a play may be better than none, but I like a whole one best. Let us play at 'Dumb Crambo' now."

"Dumb Crambo" was an old friend. Gerald began, by choosing a word that rhymed with Greek. Robin, who was next him, at once began to totter about as if very feeble.

"Weak! hiss-ss-ss!" from Gerald, proclaimed that he was wrong.

Jack went round the party, and stared closely and impertinently into everyone's face.

"Cheek! hiss-ss-ss!" came again.

Madge tried a very demure mild face, and folded hands, for "Meek;" Ella pecked like a bird, with a "Beak;" Fred made a grand pretence of being on board a sinking ship, for "Leak;" Dick and Dolly tried "Squeak," "Creak;" but all in vain. Gerald found out all their words, and still his vigorous hisses showed them to be all wrong. At last he was compelled to explain that "Sneak" was his word; but a loud chorus of exclamations declared that that was not a fair word, as no one could act it.

"They could," said Gerald. "Look here," and he went out at the door, and came in instantly, peering round the door first, with his face puckered up into a most sneaking expression of curiosity, treading on tip-toe, pretending to listen to what was being said, and finally taking up a letter addressed to Ella that was on the mantelpiece, and seeming to read it.

The others applauded vigorously, and Gerald was pronounced to have won.

Then Robin followed with a word that rhymed with "Kit," but Jack found that out in two minutes, as "Fit."

Ella gave them a great puzzle with a word that rhymed with "Quire," which turned out to be "Dyer," but it would take too long to tell you all about their games. The little ones begged for a "running about" game, after a while, so they had one splendid turn of a kind of hide-and-seek that they called "Arabs."

Ella and Leslie hid together, and so Leslie had the chance, which she had been wishing for all the evening, of telling her grievances against Mademoiselle; indeed, the two talked so much, and so earnestly, that they quite forgot that it was their duty to make their way safely home to their tents, and both were caught in their hiding-place without a run at all, which the others thought very stupid.

At first Ella had exclaimed indignantly, on hearing Leslie's complaints of spite and meanness, but, as she thought it over, it seemed to her that after all there was not so very much in it, and catching Madge alone for an instant, she asked her what she thought about it.

Madge hesitated.

"I see," cried Ella, "you won't say a word against Leslie; but you think she is wrong."

"Well, I don't think it is as bad as she

says;" but then they were interrupted by a call to supper, and Uncle Harry arrived to take them home, so Ella had no opportunity of taking back her first hasty words.

Uncle Harry, as if he had known exactly what they wished, crowned the pleasure of the evening by inviting Ella to go with them to the play, an invitation which was joyfully accepted.

After they got home, Madge made great haste to get to bed, undressing with quite unusual speed, instead of chattering and laughing.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" inquired Leslie.

"I want to get up early, or I shall never finish my exercise."

"I'm sure I sha'n't trouble. I don't care whether I do it or not. Ella thinks it's a great shame the way we are treated."

"Does she? But oh, Leslie! wouldn't it be better to do it, or we shall have such a row?"

"I don't care;" nor would she get up when Madge rose next morning, but turned over for another sleep.

The consequence was that when Mademoiselle arrived and asked for the exercises,

Madge at once produced hers, finished and neatly written out. Mademoiselle corrected it, made one or two pleasant comments on what they had done and seen, and then turned to Leslie and asked for hers.

"I've not done it," said Leslie, coolly; and all the younger children instantly looked up from their work, certain there was going to be a "row" between Leslie and Mademoiselle.

"And why not? Have the goodness to tell me why not?"

"I didn't choose," said Leslie.

"That is a very disrespectful way in which you speak, Leslie. Have you no better excuse to give me?"

"You said you wouldn't take excuses, so what is the use of my making any?"

Leslie's manner was so impertinent that Mademoiselle coloured all over her cheeks and forehead. Such a speech from a pupil was hard to bear, but she answered quietly, "You do not make your fault less by speaking in this manner. If you will not attend to me, I must then speak to those to whom you will attend." And she turned from Leslie, and desired Fred and the younger ones to bring their lessons.

But Fred had been infected by Leslie's bad example, and out of the window he could see Jack on his bicycle, and the sight made him cross, so that he, too, was impertinent and idle. Altogether, it was a horrid, uncomfortable morning; and Madge could have cried from sheer vexation and distress at seeing the others so perverse, and feeling that she could not think Leslie right; but things were worse when lessons came to an end.

Mademoiselle was very silent all luncheon-time; and immediately after, she sat down at the writing table, and wrote a long note, which she closed, and addressed to Mr. Henry Hilton. "Have the goodness to give this to your uncle, when he comes in," she said, not speaking to any one in particular, but to all the party. "Good afternoon;" and she went off to catch the train.

The children looked at each other, much dismayed.

"I say," cried Jack, who was sitting at the table, rocking upon the hind legs of his chair, "what's it all about? She seems in a precious wax any way."

"Leslie, do you think she has told?" asked Madge in an undertone.

"I don't care if she has," said Leslie, shrugging her shoulders.

"No more don't I," said Fred, with a grand air of indifference.

"Oh, but what do you think? About the theatre to-night! What will Uncle Harry say?"

That was another sort of thought. Neither Leslie nor Fred liked it. Fred even looked half inclined to cry, though he said, "I don't believe he would stop us from going now—when he has promised it for so long."

But all the children knew quite well that under the same circumstances their father would certainly not have allowed them to go, and who could tell that Uncle Harry would be any less strict? He was their guardian, and for the present stood in the place of their father. It was bad enough for Fred, while as for Leslie the thought that there was even a chance of her being left at home in disgrace, especially when Ella was going, stung her till she was almost reckless. The other children stood round silent and with subdued, anxious looks, while Jack repeated his question, "What on earth is it all about?"

No one answered for a minute. Then

Leslie said, sullenly, "Some absurd nonsense of Mademoiselle's."

Robin lifted up his small voice. "Leslie and Fred were"—"very cheeky to Mademoiselle," he was going to say, but luckily Madge put her hand over his mouth, and stopped a speech that would have brought down his brother's wrath upon him pretty quickly.

"Did she know we were going to the play?" asked Dolly.

"Of course she did. Didn't you see the sneaky look of her nose, when she told us to give the letter," said Fred, trying to get rid of his disgust by rolling about on the big sofa. "Oh, how I hate all French people! I can't think what they were made for!"

"To live in France, I suppose," said Jack, laughing, but the matter was too serious for laughter with the rest.

"Then I wish they'd stay in their beastly old country," growled Fred.

"Do you think she really has told?" said Madge, hesitatingly. "It would be rather too bad if she knew we were going to the theatre!"

"Nothing is too mean for a Frenchman to do," cried Dick, "at least, woman, I mean."

"They are all mean sneaks," added Fred, "Leslie said so; and no one but a Frenchwoman would have told to-day."

"But Uncle Harry *is* going to do something for her sister," said Madge; "perhaps she has written about that."

"Of course Madge takes her side, as usual," said Leslie, bitterly."

"I don't," cried Madge hotly. "Oh, Leslie, you know I don't!" But Leslie would not answer.

"Hand us over the letter," said Jack, "and let's look at it." So it was passed to him, and all but Leslie and Madge clustered round him, while he turned it over and over and peered at it. Madge was standing looking into the fire, too much hurt by Leslie's last words to look up, for fear the tears that filled her eyes should escape and run down her cheeks. Leslie was watching the others.

"I can see Leslie's name and Fred's," said Jack, holding up the envelope.

A deep groan from Fred,—while Jack continued, "You were wrong, you see, Madge;" but Madge did not answer him.

"Wouldn't it be a good thing to keep the

letter back till we come home from the play?" said Dick. "That would be giving it to Uncle Harry when he came in."

No one spoke for a minute.

"It is such a beastly shame!" cried Fred, once more retiring to the sofa for a roll. "I think we might do that. I should like to burn the old thing!"

"It's a capital idea," said Jack, laughing; "let's forget it, and it'll be all smooth!"

Leslie looked at Madge, but Madge kept her face turned away, and would not meet her eye.

"She is a horrid cross thing," said Dolly, "and no one ought to be made to learn French unless they like."

"That, Dolly, my dear, is a little beside the present question," said Jack. "Meanwhile, what's to be done with the letter?"

"Let me see it," said Leslie, and she leant over Jack, and laid her hand upon it.

"You oughtn't to try and read other people's letters!" quoth Robin.

"Oughtn't I? I'll teach you that," said Jack, aiming a blow at him, half in fun, while at the same moment Fred cried, "Let's burn it —do let us," and seized it too.

"No, no;" cried Leslie, "you must not burn it."

There was a slight scuffle. The letter fell to the ground between them with its envelope torn.

Dick and Dolly clapped their hands and laughed. "We can't give it now, any way," they cried, "not even to-night;" but the others were rather appalled at the catastrophe they had brought about. Madge turned round at their exclamations, and Jack stooped and picked up the letter with a sobered face. The envelope was hopelessly torn, and even the letter itself had a jagged tear.

"I say, this is rather a pretty go," he said, and Dick and Dolly grew quiet as they saw the faces of their elders.

"We can't give it now," said Leslie in a low voice.

"No; and we may just as well see what she has said, as it is open." Leslie half put out her hand to stop him; but Jack had taken the letter, and was reading it.

"I say," he exclaimed, "she does give it to you and Fred. Uncle Harry would never let you go if he saw this." And he read it aloud, but Madge stopped her ears.

A groan from Fred, and then a little more talking, and somehow, but no one knew exactly at whose suggestion, it was agreed between Leslie, Jack, and Fred that the letter need not be given to Uncle Harry until after the play. The younger ones (little children are so easily led by those older) all thought that of course there could not possibly be anything very wrong in what the older ones were going to do. Fred's small heart was so set upon seeing the play that he was hardly able to think of anything else. Jack was half doing what he thought a good-natured thing, and half enjoying the fun of cheating Mademoiselle out of what he called her revenge on Leslie and Fred, while at the same time he had gratified his curiosity as to what she had said; and Leslie—Leslie, the eldest of those present, the one who ought to have guided the others right, and have been the first to make a stand against what was so deceitful and wrong—Leslie had by little sins against her sense of what was right—little offences against her conscience, little lapses from what was strictly true and honourable—so bewildered her ideas of right and wrong that she did not at all realize how

grievous was the fault into which she was leading her brothers and sister.

And Madge? Poor Madge was bitterly unhappy. She saw quite clearly what a very wrong thing the others were about to do, and yet she could not—how could she?—make up her mind to "tell."

What should she do? She could, and she would, speak to Leslie alone, and beg her to tell Uncle Harry all, and give him the letter, but she felt sure beforehand that it would be of no use.

"Oh! if Gerald had been here," she kept saying to herself, "he would have stopped them. I wonder if I could tell Gerald? No, it wouldn't do, they would never forgive me."

Leslie's words about "taking Mademoiselle's side" were still sounding in her ears, and paining her heart. How could she go still more against her beloved Leslie—still more distinctly side with Mademoiselle—and rob her brother and sister of such a long-looked-for pleasure? No; she could not tell, it was impossible; and yet she felt as if she were doing very wrong by keeping silence. It was a very trying

position for Madge. She was really to be pitied. She was very miserable—far more miserable than Leslie appeared to be. The letter was safely hidden away before Uncle Harry and Gerald came in; and Leslie could look up and laugh and talk with them, while Madge could hardly raise her eyes from the ground. Indeed, she was so silent all dinner-time that Gerald asked her if she had a head-ache, but she only answered, "No," in a very depressed way. Gerald thought that perhaps she had had a quarrel with Leslie, and did not question her further.

They very nearly had quarrelled, for Madge had made her appeal to Leslie while they were dressing; but Leslie had refused to hear, and only broke out into wild words of anger against Madge, calling her mean and unkind. Madge was almost heart-broken. She had tried to persuade Jack, too; and he laughed first, and then called her ill-natured.

In due time they started for the theatre, calling for Ella on their way. At another time, how Madge would have enjoyed the drive through brilliantly-lighted streets; how exciting would have been the first stop, as they got

into the line before the door—the entrance into the theatre, the first notes of the band, the turning down of the lights before the curtain rose. But now it was all spoilt to her. Even when the curtain went up and showed the scene on board ship, and the sailors began their lovely chorus,—

"We sail the ocean blue, and our saucy ship's a beauty,
We are sober men, and true, and attentive to our duty,"

—she did not forget her troubles for more than a minute or two. Madge could hardly have believed that it was possible to feel so wretched.

Ella sat next to her; and between the acts she said, "Madge, is anything wrong? You look so unhappy."

But Madge only said, "Do I?" and squeezed Ella's hand, as a sign that she could not tell her.

"Leslie looks all right," said Ella, glancing at her.

"Yes," said Madge, simply; for she could not say anything else, and she had been wondering how Leslie could look so bright and happy.

Still, the music was so gay, and the jokes were so funny, that she laughed, in spite of herself, as heartily at last as Robin or Dick; and Gerald, who had been wondering "what on earth was up," was glad to see her look more like herself.

But when it was all ended—when the curtain had gone down for the last time, and the lights were being turned out—her trouble came back upon her, and all the way home she could only think of the letter that still had to be given, and wonder tremblingly what Uncle Harry would say.

They hurried in, all but one chattering and laughing. Supper was ready, and she kept thinking, "Now it is coming—as soon as supper is over, they must tell him;" but when supper was finished, Uncle Harry said, "Now good-night all, for it is bedtime," and they trooped upstairs together without one word having been said about the letter.

Timidly, in their own room, Madge asked Leslie if nothing was to be done about it.

"Not to-night," she answered. "I do wish you wouldn't bother, Madge. I am going to tell Uncle Harry before breakfast to-morrow."

But to-morrow does not always bring back to us those chances of doing right that we have wasted to-day.

Madge cried herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XV.

DISGRACE AND TROUBLE

NEXT morning, while Leslie and Madge were still dressing, Gerald came rapping at their door. "Make haste," he cried, "Uncle Harry has been sent for to the works, and I want to have breakfast quickly, that I may go after him."

The girls did not speak, but both their hearts sank a little as they finished dressing, and hurried down. Gerald told them that their uncle had come to his room very early, to tell him that there had been an accident at the works, and that he must go at once; but that he, Gerald, might come later, if he chose; so as soon as he had done breakfast he started. Jack went off to his bicycling friend, and the girls, with Fred, Dick, and Dolly, were left to face Mademoiselle alone. Robin was not up. He had a headache after yesterday's excitement, and Mrs. Jones kept him in bed.

They had only one day left of their visit, and

perhaps Leslie and Fred hoped that Mademoiselle would not ask after the letter, and that so their fault might escape detection altogether ; but it was not to be.

Mademoiselle's first inquiry, when they were seated round the table, was, "Did Monsieur votre oncle leave any note for me?"

Dead silence ; then a very timid, "No," from Madge.

Mademoiselle looked at her sharply. "No? that is singular. He had my letter of course?"

But Madge neither could, nor would, answer that question.

The silence roused Mademoiselle's suspicions. "Did your uncle have my letter?" she said, rapping on the table with a ruler, impatiently "I demand an answer."

Someone must answer, it was clear, and Leslie spoke. "The letter got torn," she said shortly, "and we put it away to give it to Uncle Harry this morning, but he went out before we were up, so he has not had it."

"The letter got torn!" repeated Mademoiselle, scornfully. "Letters do not tear themselves, Leslie. And why was it not given to your uncle as I desired?"

No answer.

"I demand to know more about these affairs," continued Mademoiselle. "Where is the letter now? I will be answered!"

"Here," said Fred, opening Jack's desk, which stood on the table.

Mademoiselle took the letter, "Then Mr. Jack also knew of this?" she said. "Once more, I ask you why was the letter not given to your uncle?"

Leslie would not answer. Madge could not. Dick and Dolly were frightened, thinking they were quite far enough in the scrape, and yet that it was more the elders' affair than theirs. Fred at last spoke up boldly.

"We were afraid, if Uncle Harry had your letter, he would not take us to the play last night, and so we kept it; but we did mean to have given it to him this morning."

"Oh, indeed!" said Mademoiselle, "but if I had not asked for his reply, I doubt much if he would ever have had it. And who tore it?"

"We all did," mumbled Fred.

"And the letter has been read, I suppose?"

No answer.

Mademoiselle looked round at the flushed

downcast faces, of which Madge's did not look by any means the least guilty. "I did not think," she said, "that English girls and boys were dishonourable. To open and read a letter not to you,—it is a crime! I shall remain to-day until your uncle returns. Madge, least of all should I have expected this of you!"

Madge made no answer, nor did any of the others venture to speak. Mademoiselle's words had stung them sharply. Fred, who was by nature open and candid, could hardly keep from crying as he thought of it. He and the others had accused Mademoiselle of being mean and unfair, and had declared that only French people were so; and now they themselves had done a thing that was indeed mean and dishonourable,—far worse than anything of which they could accuse her—a thing which Mademoiselle said she could not have expected from English children. "We did not mean to open the letter," he said to himself; but it made little difference,—it had been opened, and it had been read; they all knew what was in it.

It was a miserable morning. Lessons were all done by luncheon-time, and then Jack came in. Mademoiselle took little notice of him,

beyond requesting him to remain in after luncheon, until she had seen his uncle.

Jack screwed up his mouth as if he were going to whistle, and made signs to Leslie to try and find out how much Mademoiselle knew, but she did not attend to him.

Mr. Henry Hilton was late in coming in, and they were all obliged to wait, trying to occupy themselves as best they could. Madge had a book, but she could not read it. Leslie seemed absorbed in hers; and her face wore a proud, haughty expression, as if she did not mean to acknowledge herself in the wrong.

It was not until half-past three that the click of the key in the latch was heard, and Uncle Harry came in with Gerald.

"Well, children," he said cheerily, "I'm rather late, but we shall have time for some fun I daresay. How do you do, Mademoiselle —nothing wrong, I hope?" as he noticed her expression, and looked round on the silent group.

"I am grieved to say that there is much wrong," answered Mademoiselle. "May I trouble you to read that letter, Monsieur?"

Uncle Harry took the letter, begged Made-

moiselle to sit down, and himself took a seat while he read it, his face growing graver and graver. Gerald looked on wonderingly, for he knew nothing about the affair.

It seemed a long time before Uncle Harry looked up. "I am sorry, Mademoiselle," he said courteously, "that you should have had so much trouble. Leslie and Fred seem to have behaved ill indeed."

"But that is by no means all, Monsieur. I must ask you to notice the condition of that letter, and the date of it, also."

"I see that the envelope is torn," said Mr. Hilton, "and the letter also. I was surprised at that when you gave it to me. It is dated yesterday morning."

"Yes, Monsieur. Yesterday morning I wrote that letter, because Leslie and Fred, they will not obey—they defy me. I leave it here; I desire that it be given to you. This morning I come. I ask if you have any answer for me. There is none! I inquire, I find the letter has not been given to you at all—nay, it has been opened and read, and kept back, of deliberate purpose. Mr. Jack, he knew of this; Mr. Gerald was out, he knew nothing; but for

the rest, I ask you if they look guilty or not?" and, with a wave of her hand, Mademoiselle pointed round the circle.

"This is a very serious business," said Uncle Harry.

"Truly, Monsieur; that was why I thought well to remain to see you myself, to-day."

"Certainly—since the children are not to be trusted. I am much obliged to you."

"We didn't mean to open the letter," cried Fred; "we didn't, *indeed.* It got torn when we were only just looking at it, and——"

"But need it have been read?" asked his uncle, sternly; and Fred was silenced.

There was a dead pause. Gerald was appalled at the scrape the others had got into. He could not believe that Madge was really in it; yet there she stood, looking as guilty and miserable as any of the rest.

After a few moments, Mademoiselle said, "It is almost time for my train, Monsieur. I leave the affair in your hands, then."

Perhaps Uncle Harry felt it would be easier to settle the matter in her absence, for he rose with alacrity to see her out. There was a sigh of relief from most of the party, as the front

door closed behind her, but no one spoke; and Uncle Harry's face, when he came back, did not cheer them at all.

He came in and sat down, without speaking. Who would have thought that his kind, merry face could have looked so displeased, or his voice have sounded so stern, as it did when at length he broke silence?

"Children, I am more grieved at this than I can say. I thought you were all to be trusted; but now it seems that none of you deserve my confidence—Jack, what had you to do with this business?"

Jack muttered something, not very clearly heard, about meaning no harm, and not wanting Leslie and Fred to be in a row, and be hindered from going to the play. "Nobody tore the letter," he added. "We were all in it; it got torn amongst us, while we were talking about it."

"And who read it, when it was torn?"

"I did. I read it aloud—they all heard it."

"And then you all agreed to keep it back?"

"Yes," muttered Jack, and no one said a word. Perhaps they did not remember that one had not touched the letter, nor heard it read,

nor agreed to keep it back; but on the contrary, had begged them to give it to their uncle—and to do so at once.

Uncle Harry sat a few seconds, with his face half hidden by his hand. Then he raised his head and said,

"I shall not punish any of you. I am your guardian in your father's absence, and I might do so; but I asked you to come here as my guests, and I will not end your visit with punishments. Neither shall I try to tell you how far you have lost my regard and esteem."

He stopped there a moment. Madge felt as if her heart would break. Mr. Hilton continued,

"Robin, I see, is not here. Was he in the room?"

"Yes."

"He, and Dick, and Dolly are so young that they are much less to blame; and no doubt they thought it only good-natured to do as the others wished. Even Fred, though old enough to know better, may have been carried away by the fear of losing his promised pleasure; but that you, Leslie, Madge, and Jack, should have agreed to do anything so

deceitful—so utterly dishonourable—amazes and shocks me. You go home to-morrow, of course, as was arranged before. It is no punishment of my giving, but simply the natural consequence of your fault, if we cannot enjoy our last afternoon together, as I had hoped we might have done."

He rose, and went to the door as if to leave them; but turning back, added, "One word more. Do not suppose that if I had seen the letter yesterday I should have kept you back from the play. I should not have done so."

He went out, and the children heard the front door close behind him.

Before any one had time to move or speak, Robin, who was only just up, came running down and burst into the room. "Where's Uncle Harry gone?" he cried. "My headache's quite gone. Aren't we going out with him?"

"No!" said Dolly piteously, almost beginning to cry. "He's not going to take us out at all. He's most dreadfully—*dreadfully* angry."

"About the letter?" asked Robin, his face

falling. "*I* didn't want them to keep it back, an' I didn't tear it. I shall tell him."

"No; you mustn't say anything," said Dolly, drawing him into a corner, "he isn't *so* angry with us, it's the others;" and she began to tell him all that had happened.

Meanwhile, Jack and Leslie had got together, and under their breath were talking, still more angrily than penitently; and Madge left the room, and went slowly upstairs. She paused at the staircase window and looked drearily out, though there was nothing to look at. She could not tell what she ought to have done, and yet she was so very unhappy. Uncle Harry's displeasure was very hard to bear; and still she felt she had done all she could, short of "telling," to persuade the others to do what was right.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she did not hear a step behind her, and started when an arm was thrust round her neck, and Gerald's voice said, "I know you're not in it really, Madge. Come up to my room and tell me about it."

Oh, the comfort there was in those words! Soon the two were sitting side by side on

Gerald's bed, his arm round his sister, and Madge was pouring out her griefs, having first made him promise "not to tell."

"You see," she said, as she finished her story, "it was so dreadfully hard to know what to do. What would you have done, Gerald?"

"I should not have let them keep back the letter," said Gerald firmly.

"Would you not?" with a deep sigh. "But you are older."

"Yes; but the letter was left with you all—one as much as another."

"Yes, that's true; and perhaps if I had said at first that they must give it, it would have been better; but then I thought he would be so angry with Les and Fred, and they would lose the play, and then after they had settled to keep it, I couldn't possibly tell."

"No, I see it was very hard. To have spoken up sharp at first was your only chance."

"And Leslie thought I was siding with Mademoiselle against her, even before this."

"And now Uncle Harry thinks you are just as much to blame as Leslie and Jack, though you never touched the horrid old letter, or

heard a word of it, and wanted them to give it up."

"Yes; but I can't help that," she said, sorrowfully. "I couldn't say anything about it, if they didn't."

"I should like to tell him myself."

"Oh, *no*, NO!"

A few minutes' silence; then Gerald said reverently, "It's always a sort of comfort, Madgie, that there is some One who knows."

"Yes," said Madge, with a deep sigh, "and do you know, it is odd, but I feel that, too, about wrong things. I mean I feel glad that He knows when I've done anything wrong, just how bad it is, and what made me do it."

Gerald nodded to express understanding.

"Now, about this," she continued. "I am going to try not to mind if they think I've been worse than I really was. I know it was wrong to let the others keep it back; I see now I might have stopped them; and so I don't mean to mind if Uncle Harry and all of them are angry with me. At least, not if I can help it, but oh," with a very deep sigh, "it will be rather hard!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TROUBLES ENDED.

MADGE found her resolution tried to the utmost.

Uncle Harry came home before dinner, and took Gerald out with him, nor did they come back till all the other children were in bed. Next morning he was stern and cold in manner to all but Gerald, to whom he was as cordial as usual, and he bade them good-bye after breakfast in the same way.

It was a sad ending to their visit. Even Robin did not dare to say a word in his own defence, as he had intended, and they travelled down, a melancholy party, to be met by Mrs. Willis with cold, stern looks; and to hear next day that Aunt Eliza was coming to remain with them till their parents returned. Before she arrived, the boys started for school: Gerald to Eton, and Jack to his old school; and the rest were left to get on as best they might.

It was not well, or at least not happily. Aunt Eliza was a person whom they all feared. She was a half-sister of Mr. Hilton's, and much older than her brothers ; and at all times she had a habit of treating children as if they had done something wrong, or were watching for an opportunity to do it ; and, unfortunately, her manner had such an effect upon them that they always did get into trouble with her.

Now, of course, it was worse than ever; and Mrs. Willis, too, treated them as if they had forfeited all claim to her confidence, and was constantly, if coldly, showing that she suspected they intended to deceive her. Between Aunt Eliza, Mrs. Willis, and Mademoiselle, the children were never left for one moment alone. Leslie seemed to have put on an armour of sullen reserve, and spoke little to any one—especially to Madge.

The little ones did not feel it so much, but to Madge it was dreadfully trying. She spent as much time as she could in the nursery, playing with the babies, and she strove to bear it all patiently, humbly, and quietly, remembering that she had been to blame, even if not

exactly in the way in which her uncle and aunt and the governess supposed.

One day, however, when some fresh proof of Mrs. Willis's want of confidence in them had hurt her, Robin found her crying. He asked her a great many questions in his childish way, "Why Mrs. Willis was unkind to her, why she always thought her naughty, and why Madge didn't tell her and Aunt Eliza that she had had nothing to do with the horrid letter?" And though Madge tried to make him understand that she felt herself to blame, he was very angry on her account, and went away nodding his head a great many times, and announcing that she wasn't to cry, for he meant to do "somefing."

Madge dried her tears, and laughed at his droll little ways, and thought no more about it; for the very next day came a letter, that rejoiced all their hearts, saying that Mrs. Hilton was so much better that they were going to start on their return voyage two months earlier than they had planned, and would be home at the end of the Easter holidays—about the first of May, instead of in July.

What pleasure that letter gave! It told of Mrs. Hilton being stronger than she had been for years, able to walk and ride, and longing to be with her children again. Madge was wonderfully happy but for the one bitter drop in her cup—the thought that mother and father would, of course, hear of all this trouble, and that they, too, would think her deceitful and dishonourable. She often sighed over it, but still she had a lingering hope that all must be right when they came, and meanwhile Robin did not forget his "somefing."

It was March when that letter came, so there was not so very long to wait. The little ones set up a tally each, to mark off the days; but Fred forgot his every two or three days, and Dick lost his. Dolly said hers would do for Dick as well; and Robin marked his every morning, as punctually as any old man could have done.

Moreover a most extraordinary fury for Euclid set in about this time, small persons might be seen at any hour poring over problems and murmuring to themselves, "Now, if ABC is equal to DEF, and DEF is equal to——' something else, and so on.

Even Dolly, who frequently expressed the opinion that no one ought to be made to learn anything but reading and writing and multiplication, unless they liked, managed to master more propositions than any one could have expected.

Madge worked as hard as she could, and was undoubtedly far more patient, gentle, and painstaking than she ever had been before. Sometimes Mrs. Willis could not help wondering if the sad story of planned deceit that had reached her were really true. She could hardly believe that the honest-hearted, high-spirited Madge could have acted in such a way ; but she never gave poor Madge the satisfaction of knowing that she in any degree doubted it. Nor did she or Aunt Eliza ever relax the careful watch that they kept over all the children, as if they thoroughly mistrusted them, nor did Madge ever see that they were pleased, or even satisfied with the way in which she worked.

It was a hard trial for her ; but it was a trial bravely borne, and good came of it in the end.

Easter brought home both the boys—a great addition to the general happiness, though there were no holidays, and lessons went on as steadily as ever. They were to have holidays

after Mr. and Mrs. Hilton got back, and then Aunt Eliza was to go away, and Mrs. Willis was to join her son and daughter. I hardly think the children longed more intensely for that time to come than she did. She had had much anxiety while Mr. and Mrs. Hilton had been away, and she reproached herself for the wrong-doing the children had fallen into, feeling as if in some way she must have neglected her duty.

There was a little uncertainty about the arrival of the steamer by which Mr. and Mrs. Hilton were coming, but nevertheless, the children had determined to put up a triumphal arch of welcome over the gateway, and decorate the house with flowers, in honour of their return.

This was Gerald's idea, and a very happy one, for it gave him and Jack plenty to do while the others were busy, although Aunt Eliza said they would never make anything fit to be seen, and would break their necks besides. The framework of the arch had to be made ; it was to rest on the top of the gate-posts, and for this they had some help from one of the gardeners.

"It's a good thing you are making it so strong," said Robin, the first time they put the

frame-work in its place, "'cause then it'll do for another time, when they've been away and are coming back."

But Dick and Dolly thought it was so horrid of him even to think of father and mother going away again, that they very nearly quarrelled.

However, the frame-work was made, and it was all ready to be covered with green stuff. The word "Welcome" was to be done in red flowers on a white ground, and to be at the top ; branches of laburnum were to droop at the sides, hundreds of daffodils were already gathered and tied in bunches to be fastened on anywhere ; and altogether, it was to have been a most splendid triumphal arch.

Was to have been? Yes, that was all that it ever came to. Late in the evening, after the children had all gone in to rest from the labours of the day and prepare to finish the arch to-morrow—late, but before the daylight had quite gone, a carriage-and-pair stopped at the gate.

"Hullo, what's the matter with the gate?" said Mr. Hilton, putting his head out.

"Why, the children must have been preparing an arch of welcome for us!" said Mrs.

"The door opened, and a stream of young folks flowed out into the hall, with Aunt Eliza, Mademoiselle, and Mrs. Willis behind them, and there was such a scene of welcoming, kissing, and hugging."—Page 277.

Hilton, laughing; "how disappointed they will be!"

"I hardly think so," said Aunt Lilia, laughing too, and in three minutes more they were driving up to the hall door.

Rogers heard the sound of wheels—most unusual at that hour. He hurried to the door, but had hardly time to recognize his master and mistress, and utter a hearty "*Very* glad to see you home, sir," before some sound must have reached the schoolroom, for the door opened, and a stream of young folks flowed out into the hall, with Aunt Eliza, Mademoiselle, and Mrs. Willis behind them, and there was a scene of welcoming, kissing, and hugging, such as has seldom been surpassed.

The steamer had arrived twelve hours before she was expected; and no one had a single word of regret for the triumphal arch, although next day Mrs. Hilton and Aunt Lilia had all the glories that were to have been, carefully explained to them.

When the first eager greetings from the children were over, and Mrs. Hilton had an instant in which to look round her, she exclaimed, "How do you do, Eliza? I really did

not see you, with all these youngsters crowding round me. I did not know we were to have the pleasure of finding you here."

Aunt Eliza looked very grave. "Then you did not get my letter," she said; "I felt it my duty to come."

How several hearts sunk at those words! It had always been a matter for secret wondering whether Aunt Eliza or any one had "told." Now it was clear that at least she had endeavoured to tell. Mr. Hilton, however, only said, "No, we missed a good many letters, I am afraid, by starting so soon," and then began talking about the voyage; but Gerald fancied he saw a look pass between his father and mother, and could not help considering a little what it could mean.

But in spite of all, it was a happy evening. Some of the children could hardly take their eyes off their mother, it was so strange and delightful to see her so well and strong, sunburnt with the voyage, and stepping about as briskly as Aunt Lilia, instead of lying on the sofa, pale and quiet.

The evening was over only too soon, for what would the morning bring?

However, breakfast was quite unusually cheerful and bright, for mother was down to breakfast,—mother, her own self,—a thing which had not happened within the memory of any of the younger ones, and which Fred could only just dimly recollect. French was abolished in honour of the occasion, and all were so merry that some people began to wonder if it was not all a mistake, and to think that neither Aunt Eliza nor Mrs. Willis meant to tell what had happened.

But after breakfast, Mr. Hilton said, "Children, I want you all in the drawing-room. Mrs. Willis, will you be kind enough to come there also?"

Surely his voice was ominously grave! They followed him almost in silence, only Gerald having a conscience quite void of offence in the matter, and he being anxious about the others.

Mr. Hilton took a letter from his pocket. "Robin," he said, "come here and tell me what you meant by this letter."

Madge gave a great start. There were some mutterings from the other boys. "Little sneak!" "What business had he to interfere!"

"Just like him!" and so on; but Robin, unabashed, walked boldly across the room, and stood by his father's side.

Mr. Hilton read the letter aloud.

"My Dear Father and Mother,

"Please I want you to speak to everybody when you come home; they are so unkind to Madge. Mrs. Willis thinks she joined with Les and Jack to keep back the letter that Mademoiselle wrote, to tell of her and Fred, and she didn't. We all did, but she didn't; and Aunt Eliza thinks so, too, and it makes Madge cry.

"Your loving son,

"Robin."

"Now, Robin, what does this mean?"

But the little boy stood twisting his fingers. It had been easier to write his letter than it was to speak out, with all the others listening and watching him. At last, all he said was, "Gerald knows."

"Gerald!" said his father.

But Gerald started up. "Don't ask me about it," he said; "I promised I would not speak of it."

"Nonsense!" said Mr. Hilton, sternly, "I insist on hearing what it means—and at once."

Gerald glanced at Madge, but her eyes were fixed on the ground—he could not tell what her

face meant; Leslie and Jack were both looking very uneasy. Fred, Dick, and Dolly, not so much concerned for themselves, were watching the elders, and wondering at Robin's audacity.

Before he could make up his mind how to begin, Mrs. Willis, looking much distressed, said, "Excuse me, Mr. Hilton, I do not altogether understand Robin's letter, but if you will allow me, I can partly explain it."

"I shall be much obliged," said Mr. Hilton, "as the children seem so unable or unwilling to speak out."

Mrs. Hilton was anxiously regarding her two eldest daughters. Madge's face was cast down, flushed, distressed, but still it had an honest, open look; Leslie was pale, her lips were shut with a determined look, nor had she the candid ingenuous glance her mother would have loved to see. She feared something must be very far wrong. Gerald shrugged his shoulders and sat down again, and Mrs. Willis, clearing her throat, began her story rather nervously.

"It was while the children were at Mr. Henry Hilton's that this unfortunate occurrence took place," she said. "Mademoiselle de

Lasserre was attending at the house daily, to carry on their studies, and one day, having reason to complain of Leslie's conduct and Fred's, she wrote a letter to Mr. Henry Hilton, and desired that it should be given to him when he returned to the house."

"Well?" said Mr. Hilton as she paused. "Was this the letter Robin speaks of?"

"I presume so. The letter was not given to Mr. Hilton. He had promised to take the party to the theatre that evening, and, as I understand, they agreed among themselves to keep it back for fear of losing this treat."

"Madge didn't," said Robin stoutly.

"Hush," said his father, but not unkindly, "we will hear you by-and-by."

"The letter was opened by one of the party, and read to the rest. It was not given to Mr. Hilton at night, nor in the morning. In answer to Mademoiselle's inquiries they were obliged to admit that it had not been given, and she believes that they had no real intention of delivering it at all."

"We did—we did mean to," burst in Fred. "It was because he went——"

But his father silenced him with a gesture.

His face was very stern, as he said, "And were all my children concerned in this disgraceful affair?"

"Gerald was out," said Mrs. Willis, "and Mr. Hilton considered that Robin, Dick, and Dolly, and even Fred, were less to blame, as being, he supposed, led away by their elders. Leslie, Jack, and Madge, as I understand, arranged to withhold the letter."

But here Robin could not be restrained any longer. "That's it," he cried. "That's what they all think, but it's not true! Jack and Leslie did it, and Fred said yes, but Madge asked them, and begged them not, she did!"

A dead silence followed the little boy's words. Mr. Hilton looked round the party, his eyes resting long on Leslie's face, pale no longer, but flushed and shame-stricken, while Jack seemed uneasily to be trying to appear unconcerned.

"Does any one know if Robin is right?" he said gravely. "Gerald, what do you know about it?"

"I only know what Madge and Robin told me. Madge was very unhappy because the letter was kept back."

"Leslie, is Robin right?" he asked, even more gravely.

A silence; and then, from Leslie, a very low-toned "Yes."

"Madge did try to persuade you to give the letter?"

"Yes."

"More than once?"

"Yes."

"Did she read it, or hear it read?"

"No, she wouldn't listen."

"And you have allowed her all this time to share the blame of a fault she did not commit, and which she tried to keep others from committing? Leslie, grave though your fault in keeping back the letter was, I think your conduct to Madge has been almost worse."

But Madge could not bear any more. "Oh, don't—please don't say so, father! She did not mean to be unkind to me," she cried eagerly.

And Leslie—her sullen reserve pierced by her father's words—burst into tears. "I did not think—she—she—minded, so much," she said, between her sobs; and then, laying her head on the table, she gave way to a burst of crying

that awed and frightened all the other children. No one spoke to her; even her mother, for the moment, did not try to comfort her.

"There is another thing that I must know," said Mr. Hilton, after a little pause. "Who opened the letter, and who read it?"

"I read it, father," said Jack, summoning courage. "I am very sorry—the letter got torn among us, somehow; and when it was open,——I just looked—"

"You mean that you just indulged a dishonourable curiosity. Is that it, Jack? I could not have believed it either of you or of Leslie; and Fred, though so much younger, ought to have had some sense of honour. When do you think I shall be able to trust you again?"

There was no answer. Poor Robin had every instant been growing more and more awestruck at the storm his letter had raised; now, he could bear his father's stern words and looks no longer. He burst into loud crying. For one moment his father thought he was actually hurt or ill, and stooped down to him; but as soon as he could speak, he cried passionately. "No, no! it's not that, but oh! don't —don't—don't be so angry, please, father! I

didn't want you to be angry with them! I only wanted to make Madge happy."

"Ah! Robin," said his father, "we do not always know what we are doing when we interfere about other people's faults. How can I fail to be grieved and angry at what I have heard to-day?"

"Then I oughtn't to have written?"

Mr. Hilton hesitated half a moment. "It made little difference," he said. "I should have heard it from your uncle or from Mrs. Willis, and a very few questions would have made Madge's part in the matter clear."

"A very few indeed," murmured Mrs. Willis. "Madge, my dear child, I sincerely beg your pardon."

Madge looked up in utter astonishment. "Oh! please no, Mrs. Willis, you shouldn't do that," she said, colouring crimson.

"And now let us end this painful scene," said Mr. Hilton. "I shall punish no one; it is punishment enough for you to know how this grievous fault has clouded all the brightness of our home-coming. Leslie, Jack, and Fred, I will have some further talk with you to-morrow. Now you may go."

Very quietly, the boys and Dolly slipped away, much subdued; Mrs. Willis followed them, but Leslie had never yet lifted her head from the table. Madge stole to her side, and put her arm round her.

"Don't cry so, Leslie dear," she whispered. "I can't bear it."

Leslie did not speak; and Madge went on, "You must not mind about me, I did not mind it, I knew you did not mean to be unkind."

"But I did," said Leslie, sitting up. "Yes, I did, Madge; I was jealous and angry because you got on so much better with Mrs. Willis and the little ones than I did; and I knew you would not speak to clear yourself; and still I would not say a word, though I knew it was making you miserable," and Leslie laid her head down again, with a fresh burst of tears. "It was more hateful, even, than keeping back the letter," she sobbed.

Madge only kissed her; she hardly knew what to say. "You must not cry so," she said, "I don't mind: it doesn't matter now." Then, as no words of hers seemed to have any effect, she cried appealingly, "Oh, father, do speak to her! Don't let her be so unhappy!"

Mrs. Hilton had come to Leslie's side now, and laid her hand gently on the girl's bowed head; but the tender caress only made her tears flow faster.

Mr. Hilton said gravely, "It is right that she should be unhappy, Madge. Wrong-doing must bring sorrow. Leslie, I am not angry, since I see you are really grieving over your fault, but I wish you to try and control yourself. You are distressing your mother."

Leslie made a great effort and checked her sobs. "May I go?" she said faintly; and she and Madge went upstairs together.

Madge made her lie down, and bathed her head, which ached with crying, and hovered round her with tender care, which made Leslie feel more and more how badly she had treated her sister.

"You do forgive me?" she said after a while.

"I hate to forgive people," said Madge; "it sounds so—so—airs-giving, but I shall never think of it, and you are not to, either."

Leslie sighed. "Gerald and Robin will be very angry with me."

"I sha'n't let them." And the two sisters

had a talk which made them better friends than they had ever been before.

"You remember," said Madge, towards the end of it, "a talk we had with mother about our duties, the very night Jack first told us they were going away, and we were to be left to ourselves?"

"Yes, I think I do recollect something about it."

"Well, that had made me think more about what was right, and what was wrong, than I had ever done before; and I made up my mind to try hard to do right while they were away. It was awfully hard sometimes, because the little ones thought I was taking sides with the governesses, and they didn't come and tell me things as they used to do—and then, when you thought so too, it was dreadful."

"But I didn't think so," said Leslie. "I was only angry because you were better than I was."

"Didn't you? Oh, Leslie, I'm so glad! Well, it's all over now, and it's all right."

"Yes, for you."

"And for you too, Leslie. Father will forgive you, and you would never do it again."

"But that's not all, I've done other things, I——"

"Don't tell me, Leslie; tell mother. It would be so much better."

Leslie hesitated. "Perhaps I will," she said. "I shall never be as good as you are, Madge."

"Oh, Leslie!—when I've only been trying —really trying, for one year, and you are so much cleverer than I am, and better too! Besides, Leslie," very low and reverently, "God helps us so, if we ask Him. Gerald——"

"What?" said Leslie, as she stopped.

"I thought perhaps I ought not to tell, but I think he would not mind. Gerald told me to write down the things I wanted help in most, and ask for them. He does, and so I do, too; and oh, it is such a help! I remember them so much better. Do try, Leslie."

"Perhaps," said Leslie; and from her tone, Madge thought she meant, "Yes."

"But," continued Leslie sadly, after a pause, "I must want to do better before I can be helped. You began with wanting to do right."

"But so do you," said Madge, affectionately.

"Yes—in a sort of way."

"If it's ever so little, you can ask to want it more; but do talk to mother, Leslie—do, she can tell you so much better."

Leslie did that afternoon have a long talk with her mother,—a talk in which she made full confession of all the errors that lay upon her conscience: the murmurings and discontent that came first, and began all the trouble, and the little deceits and disobediences that had led on to greater ones; including reading the red books from the forbidden shelf, —and from that afternoon she dated the beginning of a better and a much happier life.

It was not till late in the evening that Madge had her turn. Then, when Aunt Lilia had gone out with father and the boys, when the little ones were in bed, and Leslie tired out, was lying down, Madge crept very close to her mother's side in the twilight. She took hold of her hand "to make sure that it really was mother," she said, "that she really was at home again;" and they had a very happy time together.

Mrs. Hilton drew from her all the story

of her troubles,—how hard it had been to know what it was right to do, how impossible she felt it to "tell" of Leslie and Fred, and yet how certain she had been that it was wrong to say nothing.

"Gerald said," Madge added at last, "that if I had been firm at first it would have stopped them, and I suppose that is true; but it is so hard to do right if it is to hurt other people; it is far, far harder than if it only hurts oneself."

"Quite true, my dearest, quite true; but as life goes on you will learn that when it is a question of right, our only safe way is to do the right—kindly but bravely—and face even the pain of seeming to hurt others. Besides, dear, which do you think would really have hurt Leslie most—to have lost that one pleasure of going to the theatre or to have suffered all she has suffered to-day?"

"I see,' said Madge, thoughtfully. "I suppose, then, doing right cannot really harm any one. It may seem so—but it's not real harm."

"Just so."

"But any way, mother, I hope you will never

—*never* go away again. I hate being left to ourselves!"

Her mother smiled, and patted her cheek. "I hope I shall not need it, dear; but being left to yourself has not harmed you, Madge."

Jack and Fred were not left to suppose that their share of the wrong-doing was thought lightly of, and Jack made many resolutions of amendment. Fred was younger, and had less to reform, but when he joined Jack at school, they were both known to all the masters as honest, open boys.

Mrs. Willis soon left them for good, as the children said, and went to the home she had looked forward to for so long. Only Dick, Dolly, and Robin, and by-and-by Daisy, were left at home under Mademoiselle, for a great change came before long to Leslie and Madge—they went to school. Some day, perhaps, we may follow their fortunes there, but meanwhile, I can tell you that they never forgot the events of the year in which they were *left to themselves.*

One thing more. Dolly—lazy Dolly—proved, after all, to have earned most sixpences. She had learnt the first ten propositions in

the first book of Euclid quite perfectly, and very proud she was of her five shillings, especially as no one else had managed more than eight new ones. Robin said he had had too many other "fings" to "fink" about.

THE END